



Using Newsletters to Empower and Enrich the Learning Community

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From Classroom Assessment to Newsletters

I used to wonder about my students' real feelings toward my English classes. With nearly 40 students in one class, it is not easy to monitor each student's performance or listen to their individual thoughts. Some students are very talkative and active; however, most are quite passive. It is not difficult to hear the voices of the outspoken, but it is quite difficult to hear the voices of the average, quiet majority. This is the group that I always thought about. Did they enjoy today's activity? They appeared to be having fun, but were they really learning what I wanted them to learn? What really happened in my class today?

To address these concerns, I began to ask for feedback on classroom activities and then use that feedback to plan more effective future lessons. I asked students to evaluate the degree of fun, ease, and usefulness that they perceived in our activities. I also left a bit of space where students could write comments, reflections, or questions. Now, I always insert this simple feedback form at the bottom of my activity sheets.

Comment on today's activity Fun (4 3 2 1) Ease (4 3 2 1) Usefulness (4 3 2 1)
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Student feedback on classroom activities gives me insight for planning future lessons. I am especially content when students say that an activity was fun and useful but a little challenging because that fits my goal exactly. I consider it forgivable if students rate an activity as useful and easy even if it was not fun. On the other hand, I consider it problematic if they rate an activity as easy and fun, but not at all useful. Interestingly, the results sometimes turn out to be different from what I anticipated when I was planning the activity. Sometimes, an activity that I guessed was too difficult to be enjoyable is evaluated as fun, and sometimes an activity which I guessed would be easy was not. We never know until we really listen to students' thoughts. Thus, this simple form of feedback helped my lesson planning greatly, and I was often encouraged by positive comments such as these:

- *Thanks to the pre-writing activity, I could finish writing one page essay in the class time.*
- *I really like "Easy True Stories." I want to read more stories from that book.*

Soon after I began using this form of classroom assessment, I noticed that some shy students were absolutely eloquent in writing. I appreciated their effort to write their thoughts in English, and I took pride in their trials and errors when the orthography, word order, and so many other features of written English are different from Japanese. Every time I read my students' comments or essays, I realized they were great. I gradually realized that it was not right that I was the only one who read, enjoyed, and found satisfaction in their comments. My students should also be able to learn from their classmates' comments. Thanks to a course in materials development in graduate school, I got the idea of using a class newsletter as a means of publishing my students' voices. Since then, I have seen that a newsletter can be a powerful tool for teachers seeking evidence about the effectiveness of their teaching. I am also astonished at the benefits of newsletters for both my students and myself.

Developing a Newsletter

There are many decisions to make about the process and product of developing a class newsletter. Depending upon the setting in which you teach, you may make decisions that are very different from mine. I offer the following points, not as a model, but as prompts to help you make your own decisions about beginning a class newsletter.

1. Make it attractive. Students are delighted to see their English writing printed in a cool way, and with free downloadable newsletter templates, this is not difficult to do.
2. Make decisions about what to include. I include students' compositions, survey results, comments on activities, and (because my students and their parents are frequently concerned about structure) notes on frequently tested grammatical errors.
3. Make decisions about size and space. My newsletter is one sheet of A4 paper printed on both sides. I select pieces that will have wide student appeal and publish them with the authors' initials only. In my large urban school, this means that the writer is essentially anonymous. I carry student comments as they are, positive or negative, but I also occasionally correct their grammar, particularly when I see an opportunity to reinforce a grammatical point or collocation that is frequently tested in Japan. For example:

When I talked my partner, I can't be eye contact.



When I talked [to] my partner, I ~~can't~~[couldn't]~~-be~~ [make] eye contact.

Despite the grammatical errors, I appreciate this comment because the student mentions an important cultural aspect of English, making eye contact.

4. Make decisions about the use of L1. You will see some Japanese in the example newsletter at the end of this article. Some readers will disapprove, but I consider carefully whether to include Japanese notes and glosses. For example, when students use a dictionary to write compositions, they sometimes find and use interesting words that are unfamiliar to their classmates. I give glosses for these words. The Japanese comments that appear in the margins are not translations but rather reading prompts designed to trigger interest in the passage.

Functions of the Newsletter

The newsletter has brought greater benefits to my students than I had originally anticipated.

1. Noticing errors. The newsletter helps draw students' attention to grammatical form by showing errors and how to correct them as I did above. Due to its SOV structure and frequently omitted subjects, Japanese students frequently write sentences such as this one: "A uniform doesn't need our school" meaning "We do not need uniforms in our school." One student, commenting on this example, stated in his reflection: "I saw the grammatical mistakes corrected by the teacher in every newsletter. Now I am careful not to make the same kind of mistakes by myself." Having their attention drawn to these errors helped them later with their proofreading and peer-editing.
2. Creating reading material. Since Japanese students rarely have a chance to read English other than in their textbook, the newsletter, filled with the raw voices of students, has become a good source of interesting, personal, comprehensible reading material. I do not just distribute the newsletter at the end of class and expect students to read it at home; I know they won't. Instead, I distribute it and give students time to read it, ask each other for help, or listen to me read it to them. I tell them to underline expressions they like or phrases they want to use in the future and have them talk in pairs about what they underlined and why. Most students incorporate these underlined expressions in their next writing assignment. While some students claim the newsletter is difficult to read and ask for a Japanese summary or glosses, most seem to think that it is good to have a chance to read English materials other than their textbook.
3. Promoting a positive, cooperative learning environment. I see several ways in which the newsletter helps students learn from each other and take responsibility for their own learning. For example, when I publish compositions in which writers have made an effort to use new expressions, their classmates often try to emulate these peer models. When I share positive comments on activities, a better impression of the activity contagiously spreads throughout the class. Finally, I try to express my appreciation for negative comments and show students how I use their comments to improve my teaching. This openness appears to help students become more responsible for their learning and participate more actively in the class. Overall, the newsletters increase the chance for students to learn more from their classmates, not just from their teacher.

Conclusion

Enthusiastic and curious teachers are always trying out new techniques. Curiosity about silent students' perceptions of my lessons led to the creation of the newsletter described in this article. An anecdote may be the best way to show the impact the newsletter has had on my students. One day last year, after their third experience with timed

conversations in which I gently forced students to change partners several times, make eye contact, express their opinions, show interest in the words of their classmates, and ask follow-up questions, I asked them to reflect on the activity. I was sure that the experience had been torture for an intensely shy third year student. Despite my concerns, however, her comments were positive, and when I published them, everyone in the class guessed that she was the author, admired her English proficiency, and expressed appreciation for what she had written about the class. From that time on, I sensed stronger motivation for our timed conversations. Here are her words: *It is really difficult for me to talk with boys. I could not see their eyes first. But when I tried to speak, they listened to me and smiled at me. I felt very happy. I think English class is precious time for me because I can learn English, and I can talk to many different students, too. My classmates are fun and nice...*

Her comments and her classmates' reaction to them illustrate what Tim Murphey described in an article about the benefits of action logs, action research, and class newsletters for both teachers and students. He wrote that "after reading comments about how some students were taking control of their learning and doing many things outside class, other students expressed new commitment to learning and striving more. The publication also gave my students a better feel for my commitment toward them and how I perceived their education" (Murphey, 1993). His words describe my experience precisely.

Reference

Murphey, T. (1993). Why don't teachers learn what learners learn?: Taking the guesswork out with action logging. *English Teaching Forum* 31(1). Retrieved from <http://exchanges.state.gov/englishteaching/forum/archives/1993/93-31-1.html>.

About the Author

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Reading for Communication
Pp 52, 53

プリントの最後で、次の3つの
意見について、みなさんに考えて
もらいました。

- ①若者は優先席にすわるべき
ではない。
- ②学校では制服を着るべきだ。
- ③高校を卒業したら、親元を離れ
た方がいい。

本当はこう英語で言いたい
のに、思ったことが書けない。
ともしどかしい思いをした人が多
かったようです。

英文を書くときにはいつも

主語 + 動詞

の語順に気をつけましょう。
何が主語なのかを考えて英文
を書くことが大切です。
たとえば、②について
「ファッションは学校に必要な
い」と書きたかった時・・・

Fashion doesn't need school.

これは正しい英文でしょうか？

Ueda JHS 3rd year

Active English

Vol. 4 December, 2008

Opinions – What do you think?

Result of vote 投票結果

(146 students in 3-2, 3-3, 3-4, 3-5)

① Young people can sit in priority seat.

Agree...66 Disagree...80

☆ The best opinion Ms. Ishitobi chose ☆

I agree. I think all the seats should be the
priority seats!!! Anybody can sit but they
always give a seat to weaker people.

② We should wear school uniforms at school.

Agree...106 Disagree...40

☆ The best opinion Ms. Ishitobi chose ☆

I disagree. It is too hot to wear school
uniform in summer, and it is too cold in winter.

③ We should leave our parents' house when we graduate from high school.

Agree...72 Disagree...74

☆ The best opinions Ms. Ishitobi chose ☆

I agree. We need to be independent.

I disagree because living with family is fun.

「学校で英語を学ぶべきか」について、自分の意見を書きました。

マイケル先生からのコメントです。

【生徒作文 その1】
英語を学ぶべきだという意見を、3つの理由を述べて書いてくれました。理由のそれぞれのポイントがはっきりしていて、構成としてとても良いです。文法的には、何れ所か間違いますが、全体として難しい英語を使わずに、シンプルにわかりやすく書けました。

【生徒作文 その2】
2つめの理由、日本の世界での役割についてまで言及したところがGOOD。

【生徒作文 その3】
いつでもcritical thinkingは大切!!! 英語教育に疑問を投げかけています。よく書けました!

【生徒作文 その4】
英語よりも、日本の隣にあり、そして今発展しつつある中国の言葉、中国語を学んだ方がいいという意見。興味深いです。

What do you think?

“Should we study English in school?”

《From Michael》

Recently you wrote great compositions about your opinions. Some examples are printed below. As in these examples many students tried to express their own ideas and write interesting compositions. In my classes you always have a great attitude and do your best. It shows in your compositions. Even students who struggle with English or who don't like it wrote good compositions. Your writing is improving. I am very impressed and I am proud of all of you. Please enjoy your winter holiday. I am looking forward to seeing you in January.

【Students' work No.1】

I think we should study English in junior high schools for three reasons. First, English is used ~~in the~~ all over the world. I want to learn about many country-[countries]' culture. I study English to do it. Second, I like foreign movies very much. I want to be [a] movie director. So I want to learn [about] foreign movies in foreign country. And if I can speak English, I talk about foreign movies with foreign people. Finally emergency [emergencies] in foreign country-[countries] ~~is~~-[are] very dangerous. Because ~~I'm~~ [I could be] killed by [a] gun. Gun[s] ~~is~~ [are] very dangerous. Then I can say "I'm Japanese. I'm not dangerous." It's very important. (Y・F)

【Students' work No.2】

I think we should study English in school for three reasons. First, English is very useful because English is used by many countries people. We can communicate with foreign people. Second, Japanese people should go abroad, and we should do useful things in the world, then Japan will be able to become the most important country. Finally, we sometimes see American movies. If we study English in school, we can see movies in English! I think the people seeing the movie in English is cool. (Y・I)

【Student's work No.3】

I think we shouldn't study English in school for several reasons. First, why do we have to study English?? English is a language which is used in the UK, America, and so on. But, it's not used in all countries, like Japan. Second, people who want to learn ~~them~~ [it] should go to an English school. Third, we are studying English right now, but most of the people have never used ~~them~~ [it] ^{以外に} except [in] class times. Fourth, we should introduce Japanese culture to people all over the world. But it's also important to understand different culture. Finally, I love English, but studying English at school like now is not good. We can't speak English that much. When we need English is when we talk with foreign people. So, it's better to speak than to write in class. (K・I)

【Student's work No.4】

I think we shouldn't study English in school for three reasons. First, we don't have to go to foreign countries. So we don't have to study English. Second, keeping Japanese culture is more important than studying foreign language. Finally, I also think English is important and useful. But I think we should study Chinese because China is nearer than countries using English and China will development [^{より発展しつつある} is developing more] than America. So I think Chinese is more useful than English in the future. (K・Y)