

**From ‘What do you want to learn in this class?’ to  
‘What did you learn in this class?’  
Exploring Before and After Implications of Students’ Responses**

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# From ‘What do you want to learn in this class?’ to ‘What did you learn in this class?’ Exploring Before and After Implications of Students’ Responses

Ian NAKAMURA

## Abstract

Looking back at over my years of teaching English at university, I noticed that despite the many changes, two things have remained the same in my classroom practice: the first day questionnaire and end of term reflective report. Out of the 14 questions on the first class inquiry, my favorite question is ‘What do you want to learn in this class?’ I find the most interesting answers are located here in terms of revealing students’ initial expectations of the course. Near the end of the term, I assign a reflective report on what they learned in this class. What makes the initial responses even more memorable is placing them into a learning opportunity perspective with their final self-perceived notion of what they achieved.

**Key words:** perceptions of learning, learner development, teacher development, theory and practice.

## Introduction

Giving students a class evaluation questionnaire near the end of the term is a common practice at universities. Over time, questions are modified, the order of the questions is flipped, and the format of the questionnaire is arranged differently. The changes come from above and may leave teachers to wonder whether this is progress or simply changing window dressing.

I will examine a consistent classroom practice that displays change and growth from students’ initial awareness of what they anticipated that they would learn to what aspects of individual learning were actually realized. Out of a larger collection of questionnaires and reports that I have collected over 12 years, I will examine a sample of their responses in one semester last year in the classes I taught (e.g., speaking, listening, writing, and presentation). The students were primarily first and second year students from a range of faculties (e.g., letters, economics, and medical) who were taking required English classes.

Questions that arose for me concerning teacher professional development while organizing this study include: (1) What can teachers learn from students’ responses to an open-ended question (instead of a

multiple choice selection)? (2) Will their answers change over the 15 weeks? (3) What can a teacher learn from his/her students (instead of from researchers and teacher educators) about teaching? These questions will be addressed in the conclusion of this paper.

### **Situation, problem, and possible solution**

Before looking at my students' answers, some discussion of the situation and an inherent issue is in order. What exactly do we mean by *learning*? The question needs to be unpacked in order to get at what is meant. 'Whose learning are we talking about?' is one underlying question. Do we mean the student's learning of the language, the teacher's learning of how to teach it, or both in connection with learner *and* teacher development? Another underpinning question is 'Can we see tangible evidence of learning taking place or is it hidden in the mind?' A similar question was asked by Kasper (2009) about locating cognition and learning: 'Inside the skull or in public view'. I limit the scope of this paper to the exploration of 'learning' in terms of what can be uncovered through the students' experience as accounted by them in their own written words without any prompt (by the teacher) beyond the initial question. I am interested in what students themselves voice as their 'before and after' thoughts.

It is possible that what they say is not necessarily concerned with the concept of learning held by teachers and researchers. What students may gain is a new sense of awareness, understanding, or skill. Most likely, for the majority of students, whatever they write about will not be explained in terms of measurements that researchers, teachers, and administrators typically seek such as how much their test scores went up (or down) or other ways of 'counting' performance. What students will notice is their reaction to weekly class activities and social interactions with classmates and teacher. Levels of comfort, anxiety, confidence, and improvement are some of the things that concern students. Bailey (1990) established early through learner diary studies that anxiety can be strongly felt. Being a foreign language learner in the classroom is not only an affective and cognitive experience, but also a social interactional one. It is not only personal, but also a collective experience. Allwright and Bailey (1991) has stressed for a long time, that there is a social life in the classroom and thus the 'quality of life' of it should be valued.

A quick look at an early and still useful reference for teachers and researchers, the Longman *Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* by Richards *et al.* (1992), is instructive in showing the possible range of meanings related to 'language' and doing something with it. Examples include aptitude, attitudes, change, comprehension, contact, ego, experience, maintenance, planning, production, proficiency, skills, transfer, and treatment. Ironically, as for 'language learning', readers are re-directed in the dictionary to see 'language acquisition'. The opening definition states that 'acquisition'<sup>1</sup> is 'the learning and development of a person's language'. Learning and development may be one in the same or two separate things depending on how we define the terms and concepts. What could be problematic is to

assume learning and development occur neatly in a linear pattern. For example, it could be a moment in time or the progress over time. In addition, there is no reason to think that 'progress' happens uniformly week by week (i.e., some days may be more productive than others) or that it stops just because the course comes to an end or a certain required test score is obtained.

Another issue to consider is the following distinction that has been made in the past as to how researchers (from different fields) view 'acquisition' versus 'learning'.

The term 'acquisition' is often preferred to 'learning' because the latter term is sometimes linked to a behaviorist theory of learning. Language acquisition is studied by linguists, psychologists, and applied linguists to enable them to understand the processes used in learning a language, to help identify stages in the developmental process, and to give a better understanding of the nature of language (Richards, Platt, and Platt, 1992, p. 197).

They go on to say for language acquisition that both longitudinal and experimental studies are used with the focus on learner development in such areas as 'phonology, grammar, vocabulary, and communicative competence'. What does strike me as odd about the definitions is that all observations and analyses about what learners do are explained from the researcher's point of view. Actions of the learners are used to support a hypothesis or a theory put forward by a researcher.

Despite the widespread and often unquestioned acceptance that studying theory and research prepares and qualifies one for teaching, Lightbown and Spada (1999) give sensible advice to classroom practitioners on what research can and cannot do. Research may deepen reflective inquiry into classroom practice to a certain extent. Ultimately, professional development must continue through their own efforts to learn more about what goes on in their classroom beyond what they have immediate control. As they further explain:

Knowing more about second language acquisition research will not tell you what to do in your classroom tomorrow morning. We hope, however, that this book has provided you with information which encourages you to reflect on our experience in teaching. ... As we have seen, language learning is affected by many factors. Among these are the personal characteristics of the learner, the structure of the native and target languages, opportunities for interaction with speakers of the target language, and access to correction and form-focused instruction. It is clear that teachers do not have control over all these factors (p. 169).

Research in some form of practitioner research (e.g., action research, exploratory practice, and reflective practice), as I have argued elsewhere (Nakamura 2016), is beneficial for teachers interested in self-inquiry

of their teaching practice. The focus is on what the teacher can learn systematically in their local context through data collection and analysis. This current study attempts to let the collected data speak for itself. Let the students have a voice through what they write. After all, they are co-participants in the class with the teacher and without them and their cooperation; there would be no class or need for a teacher.

### **Previous studies on learner development**

In the literature of SLA, the numerical measuring of specific features of speech has been highly influential in what researchers and consequentially what ‘trained’ teachers consider to be ‘learning’. For example, when examining students’ talk, ‘factors’ of fluency have been claimed by counting the number of pauses, number of words, speed of speaking, and frequency of repair. In this area, Eiko Nakamura (2016) provides an informative review of such measures and raises important questions about the validity of clinically measuring fluency of talk occurring in social interactions. Seeing ‘acquisition’ is arguably more difficult than seeing ‘learning’ if we consider the former concept to mean ‘mastery’ of something that was new and the latter as change of state. For researchers, measurements are vital to show evidence which supports their claims.

Historically, the 1980’s were formative years for SLA. A prime example is Long’s (1983) ‘Interaction Hypothesis’ that examined teacher-student talk in which students as subjects were asked questions. Certain features of language production (students’ answers to the teacher’s questions) with a focus on form and accuracy were then corrected in the following turn by the teacher (a native English speaker). For Long, opportunities to have many interactions (of this type) aided learning. Around the same time, one of the most widely read books on language acquisition and teaching came out. In Krashen’s (1985) ‘Input Hypothesis’<sup>2</sup>, he claimed that a massive amount of comprehensible input through listening was the key to successfully learning a language. Speaking or ‘output’ would come out of the initial input. This idea of development from listening to speaking was explained by Swain (1985) in the ‘Output Hypothesis’.

Another related strand of research on learner development came from profiling the traits that ‘good language learners’ appear to possess. Lists of characteristics were published on what researchers such as Rubin (1975) and later Oxford (2002) thought made ‘good’ learners. There were, however, objections raised about researchers identifying *a priori* a list of ‘desirable’ qualities. This could be detrimental to learners who did not fit the profile.

There was another line of research into think-aloud-protocol (see Alderson, 1984, for details of a well-known case study by Carol Hosenfeld) which focused on a learner’s thought process being vocalized (and recorded) while doing a task. The idea would seem to make sense intuitively. Ask the learners what they were thinking while doing the task. Since then questions have been raised as to the extent of what they say can be relied upon. The accuracy and honesty could be questionable as there is a tendency for subjects

to accommodate to what they think researchers want to hear. In addition, they could virtually say anything to fill any moments of silence. Delaying response or not giving saying anything is not desirable for collecting data.

Another perspective on learning on what learners do (individually and personally) is Earl Stevick's classic books on teaching and learning such as *Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways* (1980) and *Success with Foreign Languages* (1989) which highlight the thoughts and actions taken by learners. These portraits of the learning experience were based on written accounts and transcribed interviews. Also this same line of drawing teachers' attention to what learners think and do are illustrated in Larsen-Freeman and Anderson's (2011) latest edition of the popular book on approaches to language teaching. The book looks at students' reaction to different teaching methods (e.g., the Silent Way, TPR). What the review of various teaching approaches with their distinct beliefs and values demonstrates is that learners (as well as teachers) may have individual preferred ways of learning (and teaching). One style of teaching (or learning for that matter) does not fit all students.

The focus was either on what the teacher did in response to what the students did or paying careful attention to what the student was saying and doing. What was missing was an account of the teacher and student interacting on a turn by turn basis. An early and still influential work in this area is Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) where the concept of Initiation-Response-Feedback entered the vocabulary of discourse analysis. McCarthy's (1991) *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers*, drew teachers' attention to how language is actually used. After all, if recorded and transcribed, teachers will realize that they also have pauses, errors, and repairs when speaking in teacher-student interactions. The point is that teachers need to examine empirical evidence on an ongoing basis in order to understand what is occurring in the classroom with students.

What dramatically changed how we look at speaking as language in use (not only language as a subject to study grammatical focus and pass tests) was the landmark paper by Firth and Wagner (1997). Speaking was placed within local contexts as talk-in-interactions. Based on Conversation Analysis (and Ethnomethodology), they saw that the time was ripe to challenge the 'controlled' environment from which many SLA studies came out of and to place much needed attention on 'naturally occurring' social interactions. In this way, learning and using language is recognized as the simultaneous experience of second language speakers (Wong and Waring, 2010).

That issue of the *Modern Language Journal* (1997 and re-issued in 2007) to this day is one of the most read and referred to of all journal issues. Besides their important paper, there were a variety of papers included in the same issue by well-known scholars representing three different reactions to Firth and Wagner's call for placing greater importance on 'social interactions' in studies of language learning and acquisition. The three positions were for, against, and in the middle. The people for it such as Hall (1997)

are intercultural communication researchers while the people opposed such as Gass *et al.* (2007) are experimental SLA researchers. Then those taking a middle position of seeing the merits of both sides such as Kasper (1997) and Larsen-Freeman (2007) are authorities in both SLA and discourse analysis. Firth and Wagner (1997) challenged the assumption that L2 learner-users are linguistically deficient. They argued L2 speakers are co-participants in the co-accomplishment of talk-in-interaction.

Interest today, as then, lies in finding out how to encourage and guide students to be more active in class. In fact, one of the most commonly heard buzzwords nowadays is ‘active learning’. Why not just ask students what they are learning or not learning? The same core issue remains the same despite new buzzwords, increased technology, social media networks, and global related exchange programs. How can teachers help to prepare students to interact with people from other countries and communicate effectively? Proficiency test scores still depend on showing ‘development’ by comparing pre and post scores. If the second score is higher, learning is assumed to have taken place.

But in what environment was the test given? It certainly wasn’t a face to face social interaction. Recent development includes having ‘speaking’ tests that are either interfaced with a computer or recording answers on an IC recorder. Also there is an idea of scoring written responses by computer software. Large scale testing (e.g., 500,000 test candidates is a figure mentioned) will seriously compromise of what we know and experience daily as talk naturally occurring in social interactions. As testing moves farther away from what happens in classroom interaction, the need grows to understand how students see their own language learning experience. Teachers need to collect data that gives a voice to what their students understand is happening.

Looking in a similar direction, Kensaku Yoshida<sup>3</sup> of Sophia University, advocates ‘can do’ statements where students set their own goals for language usage and reflect on their fulfillment. He argues that test scores alone do not fully account for the *process* of learning or acquisition. We need something else to show change. This meaning of ‘change’ is not simply noticed in one term, but as a gradual process over time (i.e., life-long learning). In keeping with this spirit of inquiry, I ask students to articulate their hopes and accomplishments by their own ‘standards’ and understanding of what language learning means to them. There could be a difference in what learners and teachers see as happening in the classroom.

The main point of the review above of some of the literature (previous studies and related issues) on language learning and acquisition has been to sketch the general landscape of what has been done. In support of giving students greater autonomy and agency in their own efforts to make sense of their learning experience, students will describe their hopes and expectations and also explain what they see as their accomplishments. Their account is put into their own words and on their own terms as the questions are open-ended and are not graded by a standard criterion.

## **Data and analysis**

The data to be examined comes from a much larger collection of responses of my students over 12 years. The data under discussion here are class samples taken from one semester last year.

### *Before*

On the first day of class, students are given a questionnaire with 14 questions. Space is provided for them to write their answers. They start it in class and complete it as homework. The focus question is: What do you want to learn in this class? I gathered responses in six different classes. Both a variety of areas were mentioned as well as similar answers. For example, in a first year global communication class (for selected students), the range of answers included develop conversation skills, do public speaking, improve speaking skills, improve both speaking and listening skills, explain logically, express and understand opinions, and the most popular answer, communication skills. There are overlaps among the specifics mentioned. For example, 'speaking' covers basis conversation, public speaking, general speaking skills, and incorporated speaking and listening skills.

In a larger first year required speaking class, the areas mentioned were similar in what they wanted to learn: conversation, speaking skills, and communication. From a slightly different perspective, additional items included: speak fluently, enjoy speaking, to be less shy, build vocabulary, and improve pronunciation. When all students must take the class it appears that the range of topics is wide and affective factors such as enjoyment and shyness are mentioned. For more specialized and elective classes, students seem to have a sense of purpose with a clearer and narrower range of responses.

Then there was a first year required listening class which was the largest of the three classes (40 students). It had the widest range of responses: speak naturally, level up speaking ability, communicate to others, understand others, improve both speaking and listening skills, improve listening in particular, use English more, make foreign friends, build vocabulary, write reports, be active in conversation, have fun speaking, do not be shy, and have better pronunciation. What I find interesting is the mention of improving speaking skills, having fun, not being shy, having better pronunciation, and even writing reports for a listening skill focused course. While some students mentioned listening, more mentioned speaking. Possibly for first year students, the stated subject matter or course title matters less than what they are interested in. This is in contrast to a very similar group (in level and major) with even some of the same students in both classes for the first year required writing course where the range of responses was the narrowest for first year classes. For this writing class, some students wrote speaking, but the majority said writing skills. The nature of learning writing may be clearer-cut (to students) in what is taught and what they will do.

In further contrast, both in the type of class and age, there was a second year presentation skill class (required among choices) and an elective advanced English oral communication class (open for all grades with a TOEIC score of 600 or higher) with a few foreign exchange students also joining. In the former class, speaking and presentation skills were what students said they wanted to learn, with listening, communication, and pronunciation also mentioned. The latter class had a very tight focus on explaining clearly (effectively) and fluently, talking about culture, listening, and speaking. This class was the smallest (10 students), but had the most variety of students, first, second, third, and fourth year students, various majors, and interestingly, a few students from China and Korea as well as the UK and US. This was an elective class. Students (from all grades and faculties) join of their own accord, not in a group with friends under peer pressure. Thus, self-motivation and interest seem more individually driven.

In review, below is a summary of the type of answers given by first year students in compulsory classes. Note: the TOEIC score average of these students was about 480 which is about the average score when accounting for all students. Responses are listed by frequency of being mentioned (without any claim that more frequently mentioned is more important). Each and every comment is important since it comes from the students' own choice of words and personal way to express. While there is some overlap in their answers, I would argue that many of the answers reflect difference aspects of the same skill.

**Speaking class:** improve speaking skills, speak fluently, be active in conversation, enjoy speaking, and level up communication.

**Listening class:** improve listening skills, speaking ability, communication, and speaking naturally (and fluently).

**Writing class:** improve writing skills, speaking, communication, and conversation.

#### *After*

Near the end of the semester, students were assigned an 'optional' report in which they were asked to write about what they learned in the class. The homework assignment of 100 words was typed and handed in by a majority of the students. In the global communication class, the descriptions focused on specific features of what students became more aware of such as the actions that they took in respects to learning and development. What was noted generally centered on the importance of learning to speak in front of many people (group discussions and individual speeches were done every week) with greater confidence. Even in the writing class, students orally interacted through peer review-discussion and reading aloud a piece of their work. As for a specific skill, learning 'how to summarize' was commonly mentioned. Students mentioned the importance of getting the audience's attention quickly through organized speech,

gestures, eye contact, and making an effort to speak clearly. The other students (the audience) were taking notes.

In the second year presentation class, similar aspects of speaking were mentioned. Learning (in the form of attitudinal change) was explained by how they were nervous to speak every week (especially at the beginning), but they also noted that they have become stronger (i.e., more confident) in making speeches over time even to the point of enjoying it. Specific reference was made to learning presentation skills including how to prepare power point slides. Some wrote that it was only in this class that this opportunity was given (on a weekly basis) with immediate feedback on how to improve next time.

In the other class, advanced English in oral communicative skills, an elective for students of any year, learning how to participate actively and contribute in group discussions was brought up in conjunction with being able to summarize. In this class, an additional challenge was doing roundtable discussions where students would rotate weekly being the moderator of the group discussion. Here improving listening skills and time-management skills were seen as essential to carry out the activity efficiently and effectively.

As for the general and required skill classes for first year students, increasing 'confidence and motivation' were commonly mentioned. Regardless of the designated skill of the course title (e.g., speaking, listening), improved listening comprehension was mentioned. After all, I conducted all classes in English. Learning how to write reports within a three part structure (introduction, body, and conclusion) and to do this precisely within a word count limit were typically pointed out in the writing class. Students shared excerpts of their writing with group members as well as the class and teacher by reading aloud self-selected parts. So some students even mentioned improving speaking and listening skills along with another writing skill: taking notes and summarizing others' short readings of their writing.

Interestingly, in the speaking class, one student noticed the importance of spelling because he lost points in the test sections on taking notes when what he wrote was incomprehensible. Other things noticed included the skill of expressing their ideas to others in English as well as understanding others' ideas. Heightened awareness of the connection between speaking and listening for communication and even making foreign friends was made in this way. In addition, students identified not only what they improved, but also what they feel they need to improve in the future.

Needing better grammar and listening skills were felt to be important for improved communicative skills. Students also gained more confidence through a sense of achievement, a more positive attitude, and possibly the most important point, a desire to study more. In the largest class, the listening course with 40 students, as expected, there was a wide range of things mentioned. The following were pointed out: how to think about writing English sentences (for taking notes and summarizing)<sup>4</sup>, get used to varied

pronunciation of foreign exchange students who visited the class, experience talking regularly to different ‘native’ speakers, better understanding of authentic English in songs and movies, and increase in confidence and motivation.

Some students pointed out that gaining confidence led to becoming more relaxed. The class became more enjoyable, and their interest increased to continue studying English in the future. Perhaps, the most gratifying revelation for both the students and this teacher is their admission that they initially had a difficult time understanding what foreign exchange students and the teacher said *without* becoming overly discouraged. In fact, once their weakness was acknowledged, they appeared to free themselves up to learn how to overcome this barrier. Making more effort (on a weekly basis) inevitably resulted in some degree of improvement in both skill and attitude.

To review the post-class comments just discussed with some elaboration and addition (of more comments), I again provide a sample list of the type of answers given in the three required first year classes. They are not listed in any particular order. The extended answers in essay form stand on their own without trying to fit them into categories or to count frequency of occurrence.

**Speaking class:** improvement of speaking skills in terms of fluency and enjoyment, talking to foreign people, speaking without fear of making a mistake, and expressing their opinions to others.

**Listening class:** improvement of listening skills to understand better what classmates, exchange students, and the teacher say, development of speaking ability, getting better at understanding varieties of English as well as more natural speed.

**Writing class:** increased confidence and motivation to write and listen to English, writing more correctly such as grammar and word choice, how to summarize, learn speaking and listening as well as how to write a report.

## **Findings**

Preliminary findings based on sorting through the 100 plus questionnaires that I received after the first day of class show that students are generally interested in learning more about speaking especially to do it more fluently and with less anxiety. As for the end of term reflective reports (about 70), a common observation by students is that initially they could not understand what the teacher was saying, but over time they started to understand and enjoyed the class more. A common observation was an increase of self-confidence, comfort, and enjoyment in doing specific activities such as the weekly mini-speeches. Even though not all students felt increased comfort in public speaking, most of them wrote that doing so

was worthwhile for their future careers. Full appreciation and understanding of what was truly learned in 15 weeks may not be immediately comprehended. Learning as improvement in all its dimensions (e.g., cognitive, emotional, and social) surely takes time. Thus, learning may be noticed and appreciated by learners well after the course has finished.

### **Discussion**

There are limitations in this exploratory approach to the data collected and how to analyze it. Students write whatever they want<sup>5</sup> in response to open-ended questions. The teacher-analyst selects through personal impression and impact (not through counting or the use of other measurements with intentions to generalize) which comments to mention and discuss. Furthermore, there is the ongoing issue of the analyst also being the teacher of the class. Having said that, I argue that there are professionally related benefits to consider especially when the claims are limited to what a single teacher-researcher can learn about his or her students. Their written responses may interest other teachers with similar concerns in improving connections between their teaching and students' learning.

This method of data and analysis can be done in their classes. In this way, other teachers might discover meaningful and useful insights into their own teaching and students' learning. In contrast, by generalizing large scale data collections (which will probably include all the classes in the university) through statistical calculation, individual voices will be lost. Trends may emerge from 'large' data, but the identity of individuals is not known. What my study is trying to preserve and protect is the power of individual opinions and experiences. As Emanuel Schegloff, renowned Conversation Analysis expert, once said in a debate on qualitative and quantitative methods, 'one is a number'<sup>6</sup>. Let's respect and learn from what each student has to say.

Furthermore, the information that we gain access to is not limited to students choosing their answers from a set of pre-determined choices. Not much self-investment goes into ticking boxes or circling choices worded by someone else (who is not a student and likely not a teacher). What is good for generalizability may not be as good for getting to know who the students are and what they actually think and consequently do. Getting feedback and insights into how students took to learning in a particular class with a particular teacher can help answer the question posed by Allwright (1984), 'Why don't students learn what teachers teach?'

In addition, Allwright has advocated from many years through Exploratory Practice (see Allwright and Hanks, 2009, for the most recent and comprehensive explanation, examples, and discussion of Exploratory Practice for language teachers) that research should not be an extra burden imposed on already busy teachers. We should make use of 'normal' classroom activities to collect data and analyze it. That is what I have done in this study: Make use of data that I already have. I always give the first day

questionnaire and final day reflective report assignment. This is not done in the first instance for research. It has always been an integral part of the lesson as I try to learn and improve my teaching through what students think and notice.

Students' heightened awareness of what they are doing in the class over a semester is an essential part of their learning and mine. For both the students and the teacher, what can be learned now will be beneficial for making future plans and setting new and improved goals. This is active and independent learning at its best. Continuous development occurs because there are no deadlines, graphs, or quantifiable results that terminate projects and make what was once a process, a product to 'sell' or claim that learning took place. The impact can be both immediate (i.e., in the process of learning during the term) and delayed impact. The full extent of learning and more importantly practical application of newly acquired skills and information can come much later after the course has finished. Finally, there is merit in 'insiders' (i.e., the students and teacher) not outside observers or policy makers trying to make sense of their own co-constructed classroom 'lived' experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Coming back full circle to my opening questions, I will now try to provide some answers with the benefit of having looked at some data.

### **(1) What can teachers learn from students' responses to an open-ended question (instead of a multiple choice selection)?**

Students are free to choose their topics and explain in their own words. Some may say that English is not their native language therefore they cannot fully express their opinion. While that may be true to some degree, I would argue that there is benefit from students using the target language in real world tasks such as explaining their ideas to a global audience. It is also possible that the nature and pragmatic design of English (with high cultural value placed on the articulation of an individual's thoughts and feelings) lends itself to developing skills in *direct* individual expression. In contrast, in large scale surveys which aim for generalizations, individual cases are overlooked or even thrown out if they are considered 'deviant' in being outside the standard bell curve.

### **(2) Will their answers change over the 15 weeks?**

As students engage in weekly activities and also receive feedback on their work from classmates, language assistants, and the teacher, there is a noticeable change. What was initially speculation about what they would learn becomes concrete and reinforced through weekly

experiential learning complemented with reflection of what was accomplished on an individual basis as well as a collective one. After all, we (students and teacher) build our own classroom culture and belong to a 'community of learners' (Lave and Wenger, 1999). By the end of term, their explanation is supported by tangible examples of what they did.

**(3) What can a teacher learn from his/her students (instead of from researchers and teacher educators) about teaching?**

The impact on the teacher is immediate. He/she knows the students, the activities, and how performance is assessed (e.g., what features are valued). The teacher knows the situations. What he/she does *not* always know is how students individually feel about the class (atmosphere, social relations, level of classmates' English, level of difficulty and interest in the materials and assignments, both in and out of class). Give them a chance to tell their stories as learners. Of course, reading theory and reports on other teachers' classes is informative and even essential for ongoing teacher education, training, and development. However, nothing is more immediate or meaningful than what one's own students have to say. Without a doubt, something will be mentioned and pointed out by students that the teacher did not notice or even consider.

An important issue still remains of where to give priority. What is more important in the classroom experience which hopefully is conducive to learning, for students to feel comfortable or for them to learn how to overcome obstacles? Such obstacles as shyness, lack of confidence, and lack of opportunities to use the language may hinder at least their initial willingness and efforts to speak and actively participate. Activities that challenge them and put them in social 'learning' and interactional situations that they might not be accustomed to may be a bit overwhelming at first. However, according to end of class responses, it is possible for students to get used to and even enjoy the challenge if there is a sense of accomplishment. With enough emotional and language support by the teacher along with students' growing familiarity with what to do, and a clear and recognizable step by step plan to achieve goals, it is possible for teachers to witness how progress and improvement are perceived by the learners themselves on their own terms.

I believe self-discovery through weekly and regular interactional opportunities among students and with the teacher will allow other teachers to glimpse at the potential for 'learning' from a fresh perspective. An underlying theme is a question that teachers might be interested in finding out more about: Do students actually learn what teachers teach? By reflecting on this question, teachers may find answers that challenge their long-held assumptions and beliefs. Regardless of the answer, it will be left to the teachers

to sort out for themselves as to what this question means for the way and ways that they teach and understand their pedagogic practice.

### **Acknowledgment**

I would like to thank the many students who earnestly and honestly wrote answers to my questions. Without their responses, this study would not have been possible.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> I prefer the term, ‘learning opportunities’ rather than ‘acquisition’. It is debatable when a learner has ‘acquired’ new language. Nevertheless, for the sake of discussion, I will use ‘acquisition’ as the formal concept referred to in the literature.

<sup>2</sup> Krashen has a related hypothesis for reading in which reading massive amounts of comprehensible materials makes a difference as core exposure to the target language.

<sup>3</sup> Professor Kensaku Yoshida gave a special public lecture at Okayama University on December 2, 2015. He reviewed his recommendations for checking students’ progress in language learning without sole dependency on test scores.

<sup>4</sup> Regardless of the designated skill of the course, taking notes and summarizing, what others said or read aloud displayed attention and comprehension of other students’ language production and expression.

<sup>5</sup> Some teachers and researchers may argue that writing thoughts and opinions in a foreign language does not do justice to what students want to say. I would counter this argument by pointing out that most of these students’ TOEIC scores are well above this university’s average of about 480. In addition, in comparison with how students write answers in Japanese in other classes, there is not a big difference in what is expressed.

<sup>6</sup> The quote credited to Emanuel Schegloff who, for example, in his 1993 paper challenged why we quantify.

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