

Montage: Activities to Increase EFL Learner Autonomy and Understanding of Others

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to share ideas with readers on how to seed learner autonomy through developing relatedness to others in the English as a foreign language (EFL) situation. In Japan, a problem often occurs when students are passive about teamwork activities, and thus their language production is limited. To solve this problem, I introduced a class of 27 students to variations of an art activity called "montage", which integrates simple artwork, semiotic thinking, social interaction and language skills. Positive outcomes were found among the students through teacher observation and questionnaires. The activities had a positive influence on the engagement of students in classroom interaction, self-discovery, understanding of others and language production.

本稿は他者との関わりを強化する活動を通じてEFL学習者の自律を促す授業実践を報告する。日本では、学習者のペアワークやグループワークに対する消極的参加が発話量を制限し問題となっている。その対処として、著者はスピーキング・クラス（学生27名）にアート、意味を生成する思考、相互作用、言語スキルを統合した「モンタージュ」活動を導入し、教師観察と学習者アンケートにより、その効果を調査した。その結果、一連の活動により相互作用、自己発見、他者理解、発話量において肯定的影響が見出された。

Introduction

What are the main goals of EFL education? Is cognitive improvement enough for learners? Cognitive development is surely expected, but people who consider education an active process of creating knowledge rather than a product of measurable knowledge and skills say that cognitive improvement is not enough (e.g., Carroll, 2003; Dewey, 1916/1966, 1938/1997; Kolb, 1984; Ryan & Lynch, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). In their view, learners have the capacity to grow as autonomous learners through mutual interaction of self and others, as well as through the use of language, signs and symbols with respect to their academic and personal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

In recent EFL education, there has been a demand to educate learners not only as language users but also as communicators. The negative attitude of Japanese learners toward communicating with others in collaborative activities hinders development of their academic knowledge and skills and their social skills, because learners actually learn a great deal from others in a collaborative way in a classroom (Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). As a result, such an attitude limits learning opportunities, because relatedness to others is strongly associated with intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

This negative attitude of Japanese students toward communication also influences their future lives. Japanese university students are likely to encounter great difficulties in job interviews, because communication abilities are the foremost quality Japanese employers expect from their prospective employees (Japan Ministry of

Health, Labour and Welfare, 2004). For this reason, teachers need to foster an awareness in learners of the importance of relatedness.

In this paper, I discuss how I dealt with the issue of the negative attitude of learners toward interacting with classmates by using art activities called montage. In the following sections, I present my theoretical and educational stance, what montage is, how I applied the activities to EFL instruction, what educational outcomes were observed, and discussions for pedagogy.

Literature Review

Autonomy, Motivation and Relatedness

I believe that the ultimate educational goal of language teachers is to help learners become autonomous. In language education, the idea of learner-centered practice and autonomy has been integrated into communicative language teaching (Benson, 2001). From this perspective, responsible learners 'accept the idea that their own efforts are crucial to progress in learning and behave accordingly' (Scharle & Szabó, 2000, p. 3).

In the EFL classroom, teamwork (typical learner-centered activities) provides learners with ample opportunities to produce the language. Collaborative work in the classroom is important, because the classroom is almost the only actual place for learners to use English with others. Therefore the following quote is especially relevant to the EFL situation in Japan: 'Responsible learners do not have to be especially keen on teamwork, but they are willing to cooperate with the teacher and others in the learning group for everyone's benefit' (Scharle & Szabó, 2000, p. 3). As this quote indicates, cooperation plays a key role in successful teamwork. It influences learning attitudes such as self-confidence, motivation and autonomy, which provide better learning conditions (Dörnyei, 2001a, 2001b; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998).

In what condition does autonomy occur? According to the self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Lynch, 2003), people become more self-determined with essential human needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy stems from psychological processing of the individual, whereas relatedness is constructed in the social context, and competence has both conditions. In fact, these conditions interact with each other and contribute to motivation and personal growth (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Until recently, traditional studies have focused on the individual level of the psychology of learners, but current studies have shown increased interest in sociocultural and contextual influences on the autonomy and motivation of learners (Dörnyei, 2001b; Williams & Burden, 1997). Applied linguists (Benson, 2001; Dörnyei, 2001a, 2001b; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998; Scharle & Szabó, 2000) who view autonomy and motivation as tandem constructs also have suggested that relatedness and group cohesion are important for promoting motivation and autonomy. In addition, the context characterised by a sense of security and of relatedness plays a crucial role in personal development, and intrinsic motivation is more likely to develop with such conditions (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Experience and Arts-Based Approach

Humans live by learning from everyday experience. To Dewey (1934/1980), among the variety of experiences people encounter, certain events become an experience (emotions, memories and relationships) through the meaning-making process by having a moment of reflection. Siegesmund (1999) referred to it as an aesthetic experience, and it enables people to go beyond everyday thinking (Vygotsky, 1978).

Rogers (1969), the father of experiential learning, also valued experiences or direct participation in the events of life. He distinguished experiential learning from cognitive learning. Experiential learning focuses more on the learner's needs and

desires. It addresses personal involvement, self-initiation and self-reflection. With respect to these features, experiential learning is akin to learning for intrinsic motivation, as described in self-determination theory (SDT): 'People will be intrinsically motivated only for activities that hold intrinsic interest for them, activities that have the appeal of novelty challenge or aesthetic value' (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71). Along the same lines, Dewey (1938/1997) also claimed that education should be relevant and meaningful for learners.

Similar to SDT, experiential learning also stresses reflection by learners when assessing their progress or success. Learning takes place in the integrating process of immediate experience, reflection, abstract conception and action. Furthermore, this cyclical process fosters personal change and growth of learners (Kolb, 1984). To facilitate this operation, a secure learning climate, the sharing of feelings and thoughts, and intellectually and emotionally balanced learning resources are needed in education (Rogers, 1969).

How are all of these conditions integrated into classroom practice? One idea is to adopt an arts-based teaching method. The visual arts contribute to symbol creation and usage just as language development does (Gardner, 1983, 1990). It also allows learners to recognise 'the full range of human potential for expression and understanding' (Gallas, 1991, p. 42). According to Spina (2006, p. 103), 'art activities lead to contextual peer scaffolding, encompassing a wide range of purposeful literacy skills and fostering growth in oral and written language of L2 learners'. Artistic expression also permits the free choice of materials by individuals. Therefore this approach provides a powerful educative tool to support the theories discussed above.

Finally, what kind of arts activities should be introduced? As it happens, the art activity called montage is suitable for encouraging learners to experience semiotic exploration focusing on a sense of relatedness.

Montage: Theory and Practice

Montage is the method of making new images by pasting pieces of coloured paper, photographs (and possibly other materials) on a poster to form a picture or a theme. Montage was originally developed to create modern art works by cubists and later by Dadaists, surrealists, and pop artists (Imamura, 2006).

Besides its recognition in the artistic field, montage has also been adapted for use in occupational therapy and expressive art therapy, notably influenced by Rogers (1969) in the U.S.A. since the 1970s (Ono, 2005). In Japan, montage has been adapted for use with psychiatric patients since the late 1980s (Imamura, 2006). Montage has also been used for school counselling. As far as I know, only Dr. Masako Sakamoro has used montage in her English education curriculum for self-discovery and self-understanding.¹ I adapted her use of montage into my EFL teaching.

Why Use Montage in EFL Education?

I adapted montage for EFL education to deal with the negative attitude toward participation of Japanese learners. Stimulating activities are needed to overcome this problem. Montage offers learners opportunities to promote their competence and their sense of relatedness to others through the use of the language in an unconventional but enjoyable way. I also believe that learners begin to construct their autonomy in this activity. For these reasons, I introduced montage into EFL education.

¹ Dr. Masako Sakamoto has been practicing montage activities in the Department of Intercultural Studies at Bunka Women's University. These therapeutic and educational activities are conducted in L1.

Statement of Purpose

This study investigates the influence of an arts-based approach, using montage, on the negative attitude that learners may have regarding participation and relatedness to others and its ability to seed motivation and autonomy. The questions I posited were:

Do montage activities influence the negative attitude of EFL learners regarding participation in learning?

Do montage activities influence the degree of relatedness of EFL learners to others in the classroom?

Methodology

Participants

The class was a speaking course that I taught at a university in northern Japan. It consisted of 27 sophomores, who were agricultural majors and beginners (16 males and 11 females). I met them for 90 minutes twice a week during the spring semester of 2007. I had taught some of them previously, and at that time, they were not particularly cooperative in teamwork. For this reason, I selected various activities to promote a sense of relatedness among the learners. Montage was one of the speaking activities, and the emphasis was laid on prompting learners to share personal feelings and thoughts with others, self-discovery, self-confidence and creativity. To promote learner competence, speaking and writing activities were integrated into the montage project.

The Lessons

Two lessons were devoted to the montage activities as a mid-term project, one lesson for making a montage poster individually and another lesson for giving a short presentation with the poster. In the first lesson, students cut out personally relevant photos and images from magazines and pasted them on a sheet of B4-size paper. Learners were told to work with the theme of 'I', but otherwise they had total freedom for the rest of the procedure of poster-making. Then each student had to reflect on the overall image of their own poster and write their interpretation of it in English on the back. In the second lesson, each student presented their poster and gave a short talk about it, in English, to a small group of students. Following the presentation, listeners asked questions and gave comments. After all groups finished the activity, the best presenter of each group (either a student who presented a good poster or told a good story), as chosen by the group members, spoke again to the entire class. At the end of the lesson, students circulated and saw everyone's work and then wrote reflective comments on the montage activities (see Appendix). In the sessions, I interacted only as a facilitator.

Data Collection and Procedures

I used as data the observation notes and the results from the questionnaire on the montage activity that I administered. I kept observation notes after the lessons, and I conducted open-ended questionnaires at the beginning and the end of the semester, as well as after the presentations during the semester.

To conduct a content analysis (Dörnyei, 2003), first, I read through every comment for distinct content elements of their learning experiences. Some comments were written in Japanese. I translated them into English. Second, I categorised them into themes and counted how many of them were in each category. I analysed the data by counting how many of the themes were included in the comments. For example, one student mentioned that he had two different learning experiences (e.g., enjoyment, reflection) (see Tables 1 to 5). As a result, the number of the themes was more than the number of respondents. Note that all students gave their consent for the data to be

used for this study, and their comments are written under pseudonyms in the next section.

Findings

Teacher Observation

In prior lessons, when students were informed of the upcoming montage activities, they did not seem to understand much about the activities or their purpose. However, they showed great interest once they actually started making the posters, and most of them became absorbed in the artwork. It was significant that every student showed great concentration for the whole lesson, because there were usually some students who were reluctant to participate. Another significant observation was that every student did their homework, i.e., completing the poster, interpreting the image on the poster, writing up their interpretation and practicing an oral presentation. Previously, some of the students did not do homework.

In the presentation session, some students seemed a little shy or nervous, but all of them were more engaged and attentive to others than usual. They showed great interest in listening to the presentations of their classmates. Their positive engagement was confirmed by listening attitudes (e.g., constant eye contact and posture toward the speaker) as well as attitudes to post-listening activities in productivity and friendliness (e.g., giving more feedback to the speaker although they sometimes had to use their first language, and more smiles and laughter).

Their English production and communication were better in quantity and quality; they wrote and spoke about their posters to the best of their ability. Every student was able to create an individual image and report their stories. Many of them exhibited their creativity in the artwork and the verbal interpretation, and they demonstrated a deep understanding of themselves. Some of them became aware of the meaning of the activities in their reflections on what they did and why they were given the activities.

In summary, I was impressed by the increased enthusiasm and performance of the students, because the activities were very different from the traditional instruction they had received in the past. They tried to take risks with these novel tasks and performed with great engagement.

Awareness and Perceptions of the Students towards the Montage Activities

Student comments about the montage activities overall

The montage activities were favoured by the class (see Table 1). Sixteen students responded that the activities were fun and interesting, as Shuhei suggests:

I really enjoyed the artwork because I haven't done this since I entered the university.

Eight of them mentioned self-discovery and self-expression. Shuhei also said:

It was a great opportunity to get to know myself.

Three students responded that they understood their classmates better through the activities. Three other students showed their desire to do the montage activities again.

Table 1: Student Perceptions of Montage Activities

Themes	Instances
Enjoyment/interest	16
Understanding self	8
Understanding others	3
Desire to do the activities again	3
Preparation took longer than I thought	1

Student comments on poster-making

Twenty-four students gave positive responses to poster-making. The most common comment was about enjoyment (see Table 2). Kazumi said:

I enjoyed creating a poster freely.

However, five students mentioned the activity was difficult. Kyousuke said:

Expressing myself was more difficult than I thought.

Table 2: Student Perceptions of Making a Poster

Themes	Instances
Enjoyment/interest	17
Could make a good poster	3
Difficult to express self	3
Understanding self	2
Could make a poster within time	1
Desire to make a poster again	1
Difficult to complete a poster	1
Couldn't make a poster as expected	1
Wanted more time	1

Student comments on interpreting a montage poster.

Students perceived the act of interpretation differently (see Table 3). Fourteen students came to the realisation of the self-discovering process through semiotic interpretation of symbols they created. Ami said:

I could understand myself more by interpreting the image I created.

Six more students underwent the self-discovery process and expressed a feeling of accomplishment despite the difficulty. Ryota wrote:

It was difficult to describe my analysis but I could do it.

On the other hand, twelve students commented on having difficulty in interpreting the images they created, as Ken suggests:

It was difficult to analyse myself so I couldn't write well for a presentation.

Table 3: Student Perceptions of Interpreting a Poster

Themes	Instances
Could do	14
Difficult	12
Difficult but could do	6
Desire for improvement in writing	1

Student comments on work of peers

Most students favoured the presentations of their classmates (see Table 4). Twenty-three students rated highly the opportunity to know others in relation to diversity. The typical comment was as follows:

It was interesting to know various expressions the classmates made. I could get to know what they were interested in. (Tomohiro)

Fourteen students enjoyed their classmates' presentations, ten students praised their classmates' presentation skills and posters, and there were no negative reactions to their peers' work. It is noteworthy that 85% of the students favoured the diversity of their class members (i.e., personalities, interests, views and talents), because they usually showed little interest in communicating with each other.

Table 4: Student Perceptions of Work of Peers

Themes	Instances
Could understand others/diversity	23
Enjoyment	14
Praising classmates' presentation skills	8
Praising classmates' posters	2

Student comments on English ability

In terms of English abilities, the comments of students show different reactions to “can-dos” and “can’t-dos” in language production, presentation skills and psychological states (see Table 5). Thirteen students had positive feelings about their own work:

I could relax and enjoy giving a presentation. (Kana)

I could give a clearer presentation because I was well prepared. (Yudai)

Five students had difficulty in one area but felt overall achievement, as Takanori said:

My talk was short but I could express what I wanted to say.

On the other hand, 50% of the students felt they had some difficulties with their performance (e.g., negative reactions, difficulty or reflection):

I gave a terrible presentation. (Sunao) (negative reaction)

Preparation was especially difficult. (Chihiro) (difficulty)

I should have spoken louder. (Hikaru) (reflection)

Four students showed their desire for further improvement, as Yumi mentioned:

Next time, I want to speak more loudly and fluently.

These comments show what they could not do. However, they can be seen as their ‘desires’ for future achievement.

Table 5: Students Perceptions of Their Own Presentations

Themes	Instances
Could do	13
Reflection of one's performance	7
Couldn't do A but could do B	5
Desire for improvement	4
Negative reaction	2
Difficulty	2

Discussion

The findings indicate that the montage activities promoted a positive attitude of participation in learning in general among the participants. Many of them enjoyed the activities, and I believe that enjoyment led to their engagement. They also displayed their creativity, and it even helped them to discover their own personal feelings and thoughts. Through sharing their feelings and thoughts with their peers, more students could relate to others. Therefore, the sense of community in the class seemed to be strengthened.

In addition, I noticed that students who had limited command of English could still exhibit their hidden talents through the activities. Despite their quiet presence in a traditional type of class, they were able to play an active part. If this tendency is promoted further, every student can have their own role and contribute to the class (Charles & Kusanagi, 2007).

Furthermore, all these effects may strengthen group cohesion and open-mindedness to others. Montage functioned well in this aspect of social construction, but other activities fulfilling these conditions may bring about similar outcomes. Similar phenomena were observed when stimulus interactional activities were given using an arts-based curriculum: a literature approach (Kusanagi, 2007a), a drama approach (Charles & Kusanagi, 2007; Kusanagi, 2006, 2007b), and a project-based approach (Foss, Carney, McDonald, & Rooks, 2007; Kusanagi, 2005).

The findings support the theories I reviewed. That is, (a) encouraging a sense of relatedness to others in learners affects motivation, autonomy and competence, and (b), experiential education with an arts-based approach may support a learner's psychological processing of the interaction between relatedness, motivation, autonomy and competence, because it offers enjoyment, full participation in a task, relevancy and a choice in resources and learning.

Besides the positive outcomes observed, there was room for further improvement. It was challenging for some learners to work out the meaning-making activity, due to a lack of experience in artistic thinking and language proficiency. In terms of aesthetic thinking, school education overlooks values of synthesised thinking formed by multiple abilities (Gardner, 1988), and that is particularly salient in Japanese education. Traditionally, Japanese students are accustomed to "school knowledge" (abstract decontextualised knowledge) but not accustomed to "action knowledge" (knowledge constructed with the person's view) (Barnes, 1976). Learning that involves higher-order thinking is attained through multiple specialised abilities (e.g., scientific

and artistic forms of thought) through socialisation (Vygotsky, 1978). Attaining this type of competence provides students opportunities to experience different ways of thinking.

Nevertheless, just experiencing meaning-making is not enough for EFL learners to become autonomous. The more knowledge of the language they gain, the easier they can express their feelings and thoughts in a target language. Congruity between language development and personal development should be regarded in language education.

Another crucial point is to consider 'learners' feelings of success/failure, high/low self-esteem, high/low confidence' (Littlejohn, 2001, p. 7) in instruction. As the students of the present study show, what they *can do*, *want to do* and their *familiarity* regarding learning topics and resources may affect their motivation and autonomy. For instance, a combination of new and familiar experiences was one of the conditions that made the montage activities successful. Working on art in the English classroom was new to the students, but they were familiar with the simple artwork activities from primary and secondary schools.

In conclusion, montage activities were very helpful for promoting a holistic development of the learners. I also observed learners beginning to consider what they should do to become independent learners—a starting point for learner autonomy.

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The Author

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Appendix

Reflective Lesson Report on Montage Activities

Class:

Date:

Name:

Student ID:

Self-evaluation of Presentation (Check one)

My presentation was ...

Excellent

Good

Needs improvement

Self-reflection on Activities (Write comments in each section)

Making a poster

Interpretation of a poster and writing my interpretation

My presentation

Classmates' presentations

Any other comments for the series of activities on the whole

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