

Creating an environment for independent language learning by focusing on noticing and accuracy activities

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Throughout the years I have come to recognize the importance of incorporating new ideas and developing new materials to be used in the classroom. This year in one of my Speaking V classes I continued to use previous activities I have done in class which I found to be important to focus on but I also incorporated new activities. One of the previous major activities I have used is related to noticing which is my main research interest and the other new major activity which I would like to refer to as well in this paper is developing accuracy. Accuracy had never been a major focus in any of my classes but I realized after attending a workshop and reading an article presented and written by Grode and Stacey (2013), that not only is this an essential part of developing speaking skills but that it is fairly easy to incorporate into any Speaking class. In this paper, I will focus then on describing through examples and references to data collected on how, by focusing on activities related to noticing and developing accuracy, an environment for independent learning in both Speaking and Writing classes can be created.

The concept of independent learning has been around for a long time and was once defined as “working with increasingly less structured teaching materials and with less reliance on traditional kinds of tutor support” (Moore, 1984, p. 27), however, over time there have been numerous almost synonymous concepts proposed, for example “autonomous learning, independent study, self-directed learning, student initiated learning, project orientation, discovery and inquiry, teaching for thinking, learning to learn, self instruction and life-long learning” (Kesten, 1987, p.9) which has led to a difficulty in understanding and defining the concept of independent learning. In this paper the focus will be on the idea of “...

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encouraging more independent modes of study on the part of the learner...” (Souto & Turner, 2000, p. 385) and specifically two kinds of activities, accuracy activities and noticing activities, which can be used to encourage more independent learning are proposed and specific examples of these activities are given.

Accuracy activities

With the change of the focus being placed on the learner rather than the teacher in language classrooms, there also has usually been more of a focus placed on fluency rather than accuracy as well. However, recently there has been an attempt to correct this imbalance as there is a renewed realization of the importance of accuracy (Shelton, 2002). Accuracy activities are traditionally considered to be activities which focus on form, encourage formal skill-getting, are controlled and involve conscious learning, use an analytical approach, do not necessarily encourage mother-tongue like use and are teacher-dominated (Rivers & Temperley, 1978; Brumfit, 1984; Nunan, 1989; Schmidt, 1992). In other words,

...the accuracy-focused learner will try to make his speech as correct as possible in form (grammar, word choice and pronunciation), which is characterized by controlled and formal expression, with more attention to language quality (language forms and pronunciation) than to language quantity. He monitors or has his speech monitored by the teacher, being conscious of linguistic forms he is using... (Yushu, 2008, p. 56)

In this paper the kind of accuracy activity proposed is one in which the learner monitors his or her own speech and therefore is self-directed. A specific example will be given next of this kind of activity that was used in a Speaking class.

An accuracy project

As part of the assessment for a Speaking course that I taught, students were required to complete an accuracy project in order to improve their pronunciation accuracy. There

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were three parts of the project: a proposal, a script and a presentation. First, students were required to find a video clip approximately two minutes long which had as much as possible an evenly distributed conversation between two characters. Once they found a video they were to submit a proposal requesting that this be the video they use for their accuracy project. Second, students were required to transcribe what was said in the video and submit this as well. Finally, at the end of the semester, there was a contest and students acted out their videos. This activity would be considered self-directed because the students, on their own, chose the videos, transcribed the videos, decided how they would act out the videos, practiced acting out the videos and on their own time (during class students were reminded to continue practicing outside of classroom hours), and acted out the videos. The role of the teacher in this project was to confirm that they could continue as proposed, provide advice when necessary and assess their final performance. Due to the fact that the students worked so independently on this project, I did not have high expectations of their performances and was pleasantly surprised at how well they did. One group of students performed a scene from the movie *In Time* and went so far as to add timers to their arms. All of the students clearly had practiced and when assessing their pronunciation, I was pleased by the improvement that they had made.

Noticing activities

Although the concept of noticing is a much more recent concept compared to accuracy, the influence of this concept on the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) field is just as significant if not more (see Toyoura & Watkins (2013) for a detailed explanation of this influence) and to provide reasons for why using these sorts of activities are beneficial, Toyoura and Watkins (2013) provide evidence on how encouraging noticing leads to 1) better performance on tests; 2) a better understanding of what is to be learned; 3) a better understanding of an interlanguage and 4) being more motivated and autonomous. In order for a learner to be considered to be noticing he or she needs to be consciously aware of his or her language production and can be either teacher-guided or self-guided. Even teacher-guided noticing, however, would be considered independent learning because

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although the teacher will guide the learner, the learner is the one who is responsible for noticing. Specifically teacher-guided noticing means that a teacher will provide feedback to the learner which the learner will use to improve his or her language. Self-guided noticing is when the learner notices on his or her own what he or she needs to improve on. Both of these kinds of activities will be described in more detail below.

A noticing activity in a Writing class

The truth is that I use a Noticing activity in all of my Writing classes but for the purposes of this paper, I will refer to specifically what I do in my Academic Writing classes. As part of the assessment for this course, students are required to submit several drafts of their essays. First, they submit their first draft. They are provided with feedback on their first draft (see below for example of teacher-guided noticing) and are requested to make the necessary changes. Then they re-submit their essays. This process continues until the end of the semester and within a week of the semester ending, the students submit their final draft. During the semester, students usually will have submitted 4-5 drafts of their essays.

Example of teacher-guided noticing

Student's original sentence: Second, drinking coffee can prevent illness.

My feedback: The word illness was highlighted.

Student's response: She wrote illnesses.

For example, the first draft is just the introduction, the second is the corrected version of their introduction along with the body, the third is the corrected version of both the introduction and the first paragraph and so on. The main kind of feedback that I give them on their essays is that I highlight the mistakes that they make. When I hand back to them their essays, I spend a few minutes going through with them how they could correct the highlighted mistakes and then I ask them to correct the remaining highlighted mistakes on their own. Students are sometimes able to correct all of the mistakes, whereas

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most students can correct around half of their mistakes. However, it is seen as important for them to have an opportunity to correct their own mistakes due to the possible benefits stated above.

A noticing activity in a Speaking class

Over the last few years I have started incorporating noticing activities in my Speaking classes. The example noticing activity that I would like to refer to that I use in my Speaking class is also part of the assessment of the course. For my Speaking classes, I require my students to record the group discussions that they have and the presentations that they give. After class, students while listening to the recordings, make a list of the mistakes they have made and if possible, make the corrections (see below for an example of self-guided noticing). They send to me their lists and in the next class I provide them with feedback on their lists.

Example of self-guided noticing

Student's sentence noticed: I prefer to take airplane, because I can enjoy the atmosphere of traveling.

Student's correction: I prefer to travel by airplane, because I can enjoy the atmosphere of traveling.

This activity alone has been very beneficial to the students as can be seen by the feedback received below from several students, however, in the next section, I will refer to one final noticing activity which has also been beneficial for the students to do and can be done in any class. An additional unforeseen benefit of implementing this activity is that students often used this opportunity when sending me information about their mistakes, to ask questions that they may have. Normally they would have not asked these questions either because they would have not come up because they had not done the activity or they would not have asked them because they felt they could not ask them, for whatever reason, during class.

Example feedback from students on noticing activities

Student one: For spring semester my TOEIC score was very improved. I think one reason is activities in this class. I don't like reading, but I have to read one or two articles at least for each week. Of course, my speaking skill was improved too. As for my reading score, it went up to 125 for only 4 months from April. I developed totally my English skill. I really appreciate. Thank you.

Student two: So far, I cannot speak English with confidence. Because I realized my pronunciation is bad. Also, I extremely worried about making mistakes or my English cannot someone understand. Now I cannot fully express my opinions or what I want to say. However, you give the chance of speaking English in each class. So I could have a confidence to speak English. This is a tremendous growth for me. You know, I participated in Open school last Saturday and had a discussion with Maya. My old self would not take part in such a thing. I was surprised at my action. Your class is really benefitted for me. Thank you so much!

A final noticing activity

Within the last year I have come to realize that by providing feedback to students on the corrections that they have made has not been enough. That is, I would like to push them even further. I would like to provide them with what Krashen (1985) describes as $i + 1$ and so from the information students provide me, whether it be essays or lists of their own mistakes, I make a list of ten commonly made mistakes by the students (see below for an example of a commonly made mistake). Often the students will be making the same kind of mistakes and/or similar ones since they are all discussing and presenting on the same topic and because they are all Japanese language learners of English at about the same level and with similar backgrounds.

Example of commonly made mistake

Sentence with mistake: I want to do a job.

Corrected sentence: I want to have a job.

So, what I do is I hand to them a list of ten commonly made mistakes and I ask them to correct them. This is then the second opportunity for them to notice the kinds of mistakes that they make. After they have had an opportunity to go through the mistakes on their own and/or with a classmate, we go through the possible ways to correct the mistakes together. This also provides them with another opportunity to ask any questions they may have.

In conclusion, the activities proposed in this paper, which are examples of ways a teacher can create an environment for independent language learning, will be briefly summarized. There were two kinds of activities, the accuracy activity and the noticing activity, proposed in this paper. The former is an activity that was used to improve the students' pronunciation and was almost entirely planned and practiced by the students outside of classroom hours. The latter is an activity which can be done both in class and outside of class, depending on the situation, and can be either teacher-guided or self-guided. All activities done were received well by students and evidence of this has been provided in this paper where possible. I will continue to use and improve on implementing such activities as presented in this paper which will further encourage my students to become independent learners.

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