

The Effectiveness of an English Lounge and Second Language Acquisition

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Summary

A project to study the effectiveness of an English lounge was implemented at Otemae University, Japan. The concept for making the English lounge was for students to have an informal naturalistic environment to feel at ease, socialize, and to communicate in English. Students were sampled over a span of two five-day observations to evaluate its effectiveness in second language acquisition.

Keywords : language, acquisition, English, lounge, naturalistic

Introduction

Search for an effective language pedagogy has been studied for students to achieve second language acquisition (SLA). Different theories and methodologies have been studied without a proven success as Bell (2003), Brown (2001), Kumaravadivelu (2001) and others have tried to formulate instructed SLA. (Brown, 2007, p. 18) Despite the effort and headway that has been made to improve the classroom teaching methods, many English as a foreign language (EFL) learners are not proficient English communicators. Learners still have trouble with pronunciation, lack of fluency, and the inability to express their opinion in their second language (L2). Reasons for this may be numerous and may not be due to exclusively using L2, but the most likely and recurring reason for the lack of fluency is due to insufficient L2 exposure to possess cognitive academic language proficiency skills (CALPS) (Collier, 1987, Klesmer, 1994, Cummins, 1981). In addition to for-

mal instruction, a qualitative study was done to observe the effect a naturalistic approach would have on SLA in a school communication lounge.

Background

The university's EFL program was first implemented as a preparation for students to enroll in academic institutions abroad. It quickly expanded to include learners who were not planning to study-abroad but to simply further their English skills. For over ten years, the school's EFL program consisted of three and later to four levels taught five days a week. Several students took English four or five times a week and showed marked increase in L2 fluency. Though the program encouraged learners to use only L2 during the 90 minute classes, there was little opportunity for students to practice in a natural setting due to limited native-speaking (NS) English instructors. Later, with the increase in first language (L1) instructors at the school, the next step in cultivating the students' SLA was to make English speaking use easily accessible to all students. A greater opportunity for L2 use in a naturalistic environment was necessary.

Statement of Purpose

A pilot project to study the effectiveness of an English lounge was implemented at Ottemae University in Itami City. The communication lounge was to be a space for students to interact in English with teachers and students. Lightbrown stated about Guiora's initial finding that decreased inhibition was a major factor in improved aural skills (Guiora et al. 1972). To observe this phenomenon the key to the lounge's success depended on an informal environment so that extroverted as well as the introverted students in class could also feel comfortable enough to enter the lounge. Communication using open-ended conversations was the goal and concept for naturalistic language acquisition (NLA) (Lightbrown, 1999, p. 55). Since the lounge's inception, two five-day interval quantitative observations were taken over one academic year to observe L2 usage frequency and vertical variation.

Method

Attempting to attain a naturalistic approach, creating a comfortable and inviting space was necessary. Instead of going through formal institutional protocol to obtain a communication lounge that could have taken a full year, the available resources and space were utilized. For the lack of a designated space, a teacher's office was used for the lounge

measuring approximately six meters long by five meters wide. Moreover, half of the space was partitioned to occupy two teachers' work space. The other half of the room nearest to the entry was made into a lounge. Despite its size, one of the best features was its convenient location placed where students often passed on the way to class.

Materials

Major changes had to be made from the previously vacated teacher's office. The oversized office furniture that may have been adequate for a single teacher that left them, were overly space-consuming and had to be replaced. With the absence of a budget whatsoever to open the lounge, existing office furniture was collected from the school's storage: three swivel office chairs, one sleek office-style couch, a coffee table and side table, teacher's desks, file cabinets, chairs, and two partitions. Even though the furniture collected was adequate, it was a modest-looking office. Although more extravagant renovation ideas were desired, some of the less expensive options were implemented; for example, the plain white wooden office door was fitted with a thin vertical window so that students could see inside. In addition, the walls were painted as well as supplying a collection of EFL books and magazines. For comfort, many of the items were donated by teachers such as an electric hotpot for making tea and coffee, several plants, a refrigerator, a microwave, and several imported games.

Despite lacking in any interior design coordination, the room looked simple yet comfortable. Upon commencement, there weren't any signs or advertisements of any sort. The lounge was known amongst the students more by word of mouth.

Procedure

The communication lounge did not have staff dedicated to look after the lounge. Instead, it was only open when there was a teacher available. In spite of the time irregularity, it was generally open between 10:00 to 18:00. The attending personnel were full-time teachers or part-time teachers. Actual numbers were sampled in a span of two separate five-day intervals in each of the semesters during the recordable times.

In addition to observations, a questionnaire was conducted to shed greater insight to the lounge visits from the students' perspective. The feedback was an unsolicited questionnaire put into the lounge for students who visited over a consecutive five-day period in

January. It was a brief five-question survey form that was submitted in a sealed return box. The questions were only written in the students' L2 language, English; therefore, they were kept brief and simple for lower level students to accurately answer as well. Although the first four questions were multiple-choice, the last survey question, students were free to write down their reason for visiting the lounge. This possibly may have inhibited lower L2 students to write an answer, it was designed so that students could be free to write their own responses without predetermined choices. Interpretations from general observations were drawn to later correlate with student questionnaire results.

Results

The data seen on figure 1 was divided into time periods to reflect the low and high frequency visits of the day. Generally, it was quiet before noon and moderate in the late afternoon. As seen on the chart, the busiest times were during lunch and early afternoon.

The five-day observations show a modest increase in the number of visitors from June to January of the following year (N=95 to N=100), but the samplings were erratic to conclude that the number of visitors were due to an increase in usage of the lounge. Furthermore, they do not indicate how many students visited the lounge during the unmonitored open hours, recorded on the chart as *O/U*. In addition to the approximately 100 students who visited the lounge during the five-day period, the next observation reveals the time duration of each visit.

During the same surveillance as documented above, the amount of time rounded up to the nearest minute was recorded excluding simple inquiries by students who were looking for someone.

Figure 2 above reveals quantitatively the time each visitor spent during the different interval periods throughout the day. The monitored data demonstrates that visitors who came in the morning did not stay long; they often came to ask specific questions before noon. During the 12:00 to 13:15 period, students and teachers were on lunch break and came to the lounge to socialize or eat. The visitors subsequent to lunch period were mainly students who had free time between classes.

From the surveyed sample interval, an average 19 visitors came to the lounge in one

day. Some stayed for a few hours whereas many simply came to greet. Out of the 19 visitors, the time interval varied tremendously from 1 minute to 155 minutes, or 26 minutes on average. The observed data does not make any distinctions the frequency of visits of any one student. The charts are two separate five-day windows of monitored data in the spring and fall semesters. Another factor that must be weighed is that not all of the possible students would have visited the lounge during those particular days surveyed. Still, the university has approximately 200 students taking EFL classes, but it cannot be concluded exactly what percentage of students used the lounge unless the data was collected throughout the semester.

Given these limitations, the sample data can still be a reflection of the number of visitors in any given day during the academic year.

Qualitative observations revealed that student lounge visitors could be separated into two groups, the low-frequency and high-frequency visitors. The former group often had a specific purpose such as queries about homework, classes, or messages. Those students often talked directly with teachers. They were irregular visitors, so their visits were often not prolonged; they were generally one to ten minute durations. In contrast, the high-frequency visitors were mostly the L2 learners with a willingness to communicate (WTC). There was no observed correlation between the students who visited and their L2 skill level.

Each of the time periods as shown in figure 1 had its own dynamic variation of students, purpose, skill level, and L2 usage.

During lunch time, the traffic of students was greatest. It became a regular occurrence for three to seven students to have lunch with available teachers. They became accustomed to serving themselves to hot coffee or tea, or to heat their lunch with the available microwave oven. Additional students came to ask questions or to talk with friends. In the presence of NS teachers, this time period was the best opportunity for English communication. Multiple NS interaction was spoken in natural speed and speech. At first, students mentioned that they could not understand what was being said when listening among two NS conversations, but later that same year, several students commented that they had become accustomed to hearing NS conversations and could comprehend conversations. It was a rare opportunity for any one or more students to not only listen, but also to partici-

pate in a conversation with multiple L1 English speakers. In most cases, students were accustomed to speaking one-on-one with a teacher in the class if they were fortunate; however, to have had interaction with more than one NS teacher simultaneously was a unique and opportune situation for SLA.

After the lively lunch period, many of the visitors had classes to attend, or students went home resulting in fewer numbers. Nevertheless, there were those who remained after lunch mixed with new visitors. During the early afternoon, the students were mainly those with gaps in their class schedule or free time before going to their part-time jobs. Towards mid-afternoon, it was a combination of those who came before or after their class, and those that had a free class period prior their next class; similarly, Student Assistants (SA) came to do part-time work. Although they were not paid to make English conversation with students or teachers, the language used during work was English. It created a good English speaking setting, for example, when teachers interacted about events or work assignments with an SA, visitors were automatically drawn into the conversation due to the close confines of the office and lounge.

During the spring semester observation, students were interested in playing some of the word games available such as Boggle™, Apples to Apples Junior™, or general games such as Jenga™ and Quarto™. At times, shy students didn't have much to say while they were in the lounge. The games were good ice breakers since they provided an outlet for them to participate without feeling obliged to continually speak. During the game, they had an opportunity to say a few words, or suddenly talked a lot out of excitement.

As the afternoon progressed, there were certain regular students that came before class, intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL since classes started late in the day, 16:30 and 18:10 respectively. The contrasting dynamics in the lounge transformed again. These students were generally in their third or fourth year of university and had built close friendships amongst the EFL students. Nonetheless, regardless of which EFL class they took, if the learners stayed long enough in the lounge, they became familiar with teachers and other students of varying L2 skill levels. As observed in figure 2, the students tended to stay longer per visit. It was a regular occurrence for a few students with a high WTC to spend most of their time in the lounge even though they had two class periods (3 hours) open prior to their next class. Many of those with class schedules as mentioned were

observed, but few ever stayed that long, and if so, they did so sporadically. In addition, instructors were not always available to interact in the lounge at this time, so students were sometimes left to converse with each other. The absence of teachers in the conversation resulted in students conversing in L1 rather than L2, an observed result that two students who speak the same L1 language would use their native tongue rather than both using L2.

Besides the observations taken over two five-day intervals, data was collected from a student questionnaire as shown below. During the January five-day interval, 19 students completed the questionnaire form. Since it was an unsolicited survey, it is uncertain the exact percentage of participating visitors who filled out the questionnaire. Calculating the observed mean of visits per week from figure 1, approximately 20% student participation could be extrapolated.

The results of the questionnaire revealed that the frequency of visits per week varied from once to seven or more times a week. The three students who were indicated with the result of '7' above, noted that they came in excess of seven times a week or multiple times during the day. When asked, "How much time do you usually spend in the lounge each time?" the students' response varied from 5 to 60 minutes. Thirdly, when asked to indicate how much of their visit was used in speaking L2, their responses were similarly tabulated ranging from 3 minutes to 40 minutes per visit.

In addition to how much time was spent, the questionnaire explored what they did and the reason for their visits to the lounge. The most common response was chatting with the other remaining three reasons still being equally prevalent were: to have lunch, to meet friends, and to ask questions. In the final question, students were free to write down their reason for visiting the lounge. Their varied answers were grouped into four responses: it is enjoyable, to ask questions, to talk in English with teachers, and lastly, for no reason.

One of the significant observations that could be concluded from this survey was that student used a large percentage of the time speaking in L2. If the total number of minutes used speaking in English per visit was divided by the total number of minutes spent per visit in the lounge, students spent approximately 50% of their time using L2. With 19 vol-

Fig 3

Voluntary Questionnaire Results Given from Students

Survey Participant (n)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	Total	Avg
How many times do you visit the English lounge in one week?	1	1	3	7	3	7	3	1	2	1	1	1	4	4	3	4	7	1	3	57	3
How much time do you usually spend in the lounge each time? (in minutes)	30	30	60	30	15	30	20	30	60	5	15	30	60	30	15	20	5	10	30	525	28
How much time do you usually spend speaking English in the lounge? (in minutes)	5	5	20	5	3	30	10	10	30	5	5	30	40	20	3	5	3	5	30	264	14
What do you do in the lounge?																					
Chat	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		68%
Have lunch			0			0			0			0				0			0		37%
Meet Friends				0		0	0					0	0	0		0					42%
To ask questions				0	0					0		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		47%
Other – Snacks				0																	5%
Other – Free time																			0		5%
Why do you visit the lounge? (F = fun; E = talk in English; N = no reason; Q = ask questions)	F	E	E	F	E	E	E	F	E	Q	E	F	F	F	N	F	N	Q	E		

Questionnaire taken over a one week period in February

untary questionnaire participants, an average of 14 minutes per visit was spent communicating in L2. Moreover, if an average of three visits per week (fig 3) was paid to the lounge, it could be calculated that 42 minutes on average per week was used in L2 communication.

Discussion

The questionnaire asked students to indicate their result in minutes which may explain why students did not put results greater than 60 minutes. Calculating over one hour may have been inhibiting or the frequency of long visits of over 60 minutes may have not been frequent enough to indicate on the survey. In contrast to the student questionnaire results, figure 2 reveals observed time periods in which thirteen visits actually exceeded 60 minutes in June, and nineteen visits in January.

Questionnaires also have inaccuracies since each visit may have a different purpose and activity on any given day. For visitors to surmise their yearly activity during the year on a “quick” questionnaire may result in some discrepancies.

Conclusion

The observed data collected over two separate but consecutive five-day intervals demonstrated that the lounge was frequented by approximately 100 visits per interval and had a significant impact on L2 learners' vertical variation over the course of one academic year. Many students spoke L2 majority of the time including several regular students that spoke L2 predominately. Furthermore, among the regular visitors, L2 was spoken more extensively (60 – 210 minutes per week).

Although there is insufficient observation and testing to quantify visitor's vertical variation from these observed and surveyed results, it can be stated that each student had an opportunity for practical L2 usage utilizing a naturalistic language acquisition approach. Still, others progressed to comprehending multiple NS conversations and were not only able to listen, but also comprehend and interact.

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