

Reflection and Peer Support in the Mixed-Level Language Classroom

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Abstract

This paper on mixed-level language classes includes a brief review of literature on the topic of mixed-level language education and goes on to present a classroom activity designed to maximize student speaking time in a mixed-level environment while also providing periods of reflection and peer conversation in L1. This activity is then viewed in the light of Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning. In addition, a summary of student response to the speaking activity is presented in the form of survey results.

Introduction

Even in the most carefully streamed language classes, students' levels will vary. In non-streamed courses that are open to all or most students at a given school, potential variation among learners' levels is even greater. Furthermore, as class size increases, so does the diversity of levels. If these are closely grouped, instructors are likely to find, when designing materials or selecting textbooks, ascertaining an overall ability level a reasonably straightforward process. When working with a group in which levels vary dramatically, however, it can be challenging to identify a center of gravity, a general level of difficulty and complexity for materials and classroom language that is likely to serve all of the students. To illustrate this challenge, imagine an extreme case in which students' ability levels are in dual clusters: one around each end of a continuum. The instructor, aiming for the middle, selects a textbook that the advanced students find too easy and the lower-level students find too difficult. Though exaggerated, this scene captures what occurs—in varying degrees—in all classes. As Prodromou (1992) states, "All classes are, of course, mixed ability. Although there are mild and acute cases of mixed ability, all classes are made up of individuals who differ in any number of ways" (p.7).

The purpose of this paper is to explore issues stemming from mixed-level language classes and to present one practical solution. Beginning with a brief look at other thinking on the topic of mixed-level classes, I will go on to describe a classroom activity that addresses the mixed-level issue. This activity has students engaged in an in-class conversation with a low barrier for participation coupled with peer strategizing sessions in the students' first language, which allows students to reflect on their performance, to make decisions about their own improvement, and to see immediate evidence of their progress. Providing time for reflection, as noted by Kolb (1984), is essential in creating effective learning environments for mixed-level classes.

Literature Review

A common theme in the literature on mixed-level language teaching is the ubiquity of the issue. Woodward (2004) addresses this directly: "It's strange that we tend to regard heterogeneous classes as a special category when they are our everyday reality" (p. 213). Along similar lines, Brown and Burns (1999), encouraging a proactive stance, write, "It seems more useful to see 'disparateness' as a classroom reality and as a challenge to be addressed and solved rather than as a barrier to teaching and learning" (p. 6). H.D. Brown (2001) suggests several methods for addressing challenges associated with mixed-level classes, including a wise admonition against "blanket classifications into 'the good students' and 'the bad students'" (p. 196). Ainslie (1994) reminds us that, in addition to language ability, there are other capacities that will always vary in our classes. These include motivation, confidence, anxiety level and health, among others. Brunton (1997) echoes this notion and prefers the term "mixed capacity classes." Hess (2001) proposes eleven principles for instructors to consider when working with "large multilevel classes," among which are *variety*, *interest*, *personalization*, *open-endedness*, *setting up routines*, and *collaboration*. On the topic of collaboration, Lasry, Charles, Whittaker, and Lautman, (2009) demonstrate that brief periods of peer discussion lead to a significantly higher number of correct responses on algebra and physics questions than did individual reflection. Against this backdrop, let's turn to a teaching technique designed for a mixed-level class.

Methodology

The idea for the technique, a conversation activity, has its origins in student feedback. My class had just completed a unit in our textbook, and I wanted to gain a sense of pacing. Too fast? Too slow? I taught two sections of this particular course, an elective class focusing on conversational English, and gathered feedback from both. Each time, the standout comment was "We need more speaking time." It was immediately clear that this was true. Their time for using English conversationally had indeed been sparse. We had dutifully gone through most sections of the unit in the textbook—the vocabulary practice, the target skill, a bit of grammar—and when we arrived at the free practice section, only about ten minutes remained. Strict adherence to the structure of the textbook can be comforting for both teacher and student, but it can also result in missed opportunities to personalize classes—to shape class

activities to fit students' needs and levels more closely. Griffiths and Keohane (2000) address this very point: "It is surprisingly easy, when working with traditional materials, to neglect learners' individuality by omitting personally meaningful content" (p. 2). The student feedback provided the impetus to move away from a course design dictated by the structure of the textbook and toward something that was more aligned with the students' needs and wants.

Is it even possible to meet the varied needs, unique interests and learning styles of a large group of learners? Asking this must be quite common among teachers of all varieties. With this question in mind, then, let's first establish some of the factors about which we can be reasonably sure for this particular group of language learners. The course under consideration was an elective, so all of these students had chosen to take an English class. This diverse group shared an interest in English. The course was called *Speaking Skills*, so here is another point the students likely had in common: a desire to *speak* the language. This is a good deal of information without needing to dig too deeply.

Also known is the fact that the typical Japanese university student has years of English study behind her, but we do not know how much has been retained. It is common to see Japanese high school students memorizing English words and phrases while riding the train, but it cannot be known how long she will have easy access to these words in her memory. On the topic of previous exposure to English, there are two questions relevant to my purpose. First, how long do students hold on to these items in their memories? And second, what will it take, when these learners arrive at a university speaking class, to free those bits of language slumbering in their memories so that they can again put them to use?

These, then, were the certainties: the students wanted to speak English; they'd had years of English exposure in their backgrounds; and some percentage of their English had passed from active recall. These three points provide quite a bit of useful information, and they comprise the foundation of the activity I will introduce here, a response to the students' request for more speaking time.

The activity, dubbed *yo-yo* after the toy, has students venturing out from a peer partnership that remains stable for the duration of the activity—in which they speak Japanese—to use English in a conversation with a new partner and then returning for reflection—again in Japanese—with the stable partner. In a single lesson, students repeat this for a total of three cycles. What follows is a detailed account of the process.

As homework, prior to the activity, all students do a fairly demanding vocabulary task that involves dictionary work, matching, and fill-in-the-blank exercises. The vocabulary words are to be used in discussing certain topics, like personality, careers or international experience. In class, students check their vocabulary homework, asking the teacher for clarification or examples if necessary. Once the vocabulary has been covered to everyone's satisfaction, the teacher puts students together in pairs.

For the purpose of the yo-yo activity, this first collaborator is referred to as the *home partner*. This is the pairing that remains consistent throughout the activity. These pairs receive a list of questions (see Appendix) that are related to the same topic as the vocabulary exercises done for homework. Students read the questions, making sure they understand the meaning of each as well as all of the vocabulary in the question set. During all sessions with the home partner, students speak in Japanese (some students—particularly later in the semester—choose English). In addition, students are free to use their dictionaries and ask questions of the teacher, activities they are not to do during the conversations that follow.

Students are now ready for their first conversation in English. There is often a feeling of excitement as partners say, “See you soon! Good luck!” and the like. (The instructor, considering the number of students and the configuration of the room, has made a simple system for changing partners.) During the conversation periods, students are instructed not to use their dictionaries and not to ask the teacher any questions; they do the best they can with their current knowledge. They are free to use the list of questions as they like: they may opt to move through them quickly, or they may choose to explore each one more deeply, following interesting forks in the conversational road. (The practice of asking follow up questions receives a lot of attention in my class; I introduce it early and revisit it often.) At the end of the conversation period—which usually lasts eight to ten minutes—students bid farewell to each other: “Thank you!”, “It was nice talking with you!”, and “See you later!”.

The yo-yo then returns, and home partners are reunited. It is time to debrief the experience. The instructor asks students to talk about the conversation in whatever way would be most beneficial to them as they prepare for the next round of conversations in English. Students are encouraged to speak Japanese for this session, and most do. According to the results of a survey about the yo-yo activity that I administered (see Table 1), topics during this session are a combination of vocabulary, grammar, overall sense of fluency, or the content of their discussions. In other words, this is where each student gets what she needs. Her resources include the home partner, a dictionary, the teacher, the textbook, and her notes.

Table 1

What did you usually talk about with your home partner?

(Note: Students were able to select more than one topic.)

Vocabulary	27
Enjoyment of the conversation	22
Grammar	11
Fluency	11
Interest in the topic & conversation	10

Next, everyone gets a completely new partner, starts with, “Hi! My name is...” and dives into the list of questions again.

A concise overview of the yo-yo process

1. Meet with home partner to check understanding of questions and vocabulary (Japanese).
2. Meet with conversation partner one for an 8-10 minute conversation (English).
3. Debrief conversation 1 with home partner (Japanese).
4. Meet with conversation partner two for an 8-10 minute conversation (English).
5. Debrief conversation 2 with home partner; compare 1 and 2 (Japanese).
6. Meet with conversation partner three for an 8-10 minute conversation (English).
7. Debrief conversation 3 and full set of conversations with home partner (Japanese).

Kolb and the Value of Reflection

In the yo-yo activity, students have time to reflect on what is taking place in the classroom and how they can improve what they are doing. It is in this reflective mode that each student, regardless of her ability to communicate in English, has the opportunity to identify her own unique path forward. This will look different for each student, but no one is left out; there is a next step for everyone. Kolb (1984) provides a useful model for understanding the role of reflection in the learning process.

In Kolb’s model, there are four modes, which must all be present for true learning to take place: *concrete experience*, which entails exposure to new learning experiences; *reflective observation*, in which the learner reflects on the experiences; *abstract conceptualization*, in which learners generate theories about their experiences based on reflection; and *active experimentation*, in which these theories are tested through real-world application. *Active experimentation* yields more experience, and the cycle repeats.

About the tension present in his model, Kolb writes:

How can one act and reflect at the same time? How can one be concrete and immediate and still be theoretical? Learning requires abilities that are polar opposites, and the learner, as a result, must continually choose which set of learning abilities he or she will bring to bear in any specific learning situation. (p. 30-31)

In this model, *concrete experience* and *abstract conceptualization* exist as dialectically opposed positions on an axis designating “grasping experience.” *Reflective observation* and *active experimentation* have the same dialectic relationship on an axis designating “transforming experience.” In the next section, we will look at the yo-yo activity in the light of Kolb’s model.

Yo-Yo and Kolb

Kolb (2005) refers to his model of experiential learning as “...an idealized learning cycle or spiral...” This designation, *idealized*, gives the practitioner some freedom to experiment with differing interpretations and applications of the model. It is a model after all—a lens through which we may see and try to understand processes happening around us and, at the same time, a tool that helps us build supportive contexts for learning. Let’s look at the yo-yo activity through this lens.

First, learners look at the list of questions with their home partners, making sure they understand the questions and all of the vocabulary. This can be seen as dealing with *concrete experience*. Concrete suggests solidity, a firm foundation from which to move forward or spiral upward. The list of questions will not change during this activity. Learners then engage in *reflective observation* of what they know relative to the list of questions. They recall experiences and ask questions of themselves and of their partners. Moving toward the first discussion in English, learners may begin to imagine themselves speaking their second language, anticipating questions from their new partners, gathering vocabulary they may need. This is *abstract conceptualization*. Note that nothing is yet real; they are at the pole opposite the concrete. Then, finally, in conversation, they are in *active experimentation*. Are the conversations playing out as they had imagined? Are they able to use some of the words they had begun to gather? As this conversation unfolds, a new *concrete experience* emerges.

In Kolb’s words (2005):

Immediate or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences.
(194)

Students repeat the cycle but with a focus now on the new *concrete experience*—conversation one—on which they *reflect* with the home partner and formulate—in *abstract conceptualization*—strategies for the next conversation. Learners test and apply these new strategies, gleaned from reflection, in conversation two, another iteration of *active experimentation*. Kolb writes, “Thus, in the process of learning, one moves in varying degrees from actor to observer, and from specific involvement to general analytic detachment” (1984 p. 30-31). This process is evident in the yo-yo activity.

Let’s listen in on Yuka and Sumi, home partners, as they debrief conversation one, which provides the concrete experience for them to consider. The conversation is presented here in English, but they would be speaking Japanese. The topic is international experience (see Appendix for the full list of questions).

Y: How was it?

S: It was hard... but it was fun.

Y: What did you talk about?

S: Mainly about whether or not we want to live overseas in the future.

Y: That's what we talked about, too.

S: I need more vocabulary. That reminds me... How do you say "it depends on something (何による / *nani ni yoru*)" in English? I wanted to say, "It depends on the country (国による / *kuni ni yoru*)" about whether or not I want to live abroad.

Y: I think you say, "It depends on the country."

S: Oh, that's right. I'm going to try to use that next time.

This might be part of a typical dialogue between home partners. Kolb writes, "Making space for good conversation as part of the educational process provides the opportunity for reflection and meaning making about experiences that improve the effectiveness of experiential learning" (2005, p. 208). In a relaxed, friendly manner, Yuka and Sumi support each other's learning. The conversation in English provides the concrete experience, and they reflect on this: *How was it? It was hard. It was fun. I need more vocabulary.* We also see *abstract conceptualization* as Sumi recalls how to say "it depends on" with Yuka's help and envisions herself using it in another conversation. In the calm, supportive environment of the home partner conversation, Sumi can unearth this half-forgotten phrase. Actually deploying the phrase or even searching for the appropriate time to use it happens during *active experimentation*. This exchange between home partners exemplifies the shift "from actor to observer, and from specific involvement to general analytic detachment" (Kolb, 1984, p. 30-31).

Kolb also helps establish a rationale for focused, purposeful use of L1, Japanese in this case. In the sample conversation above, Yuka and Sumi, speaking Japanese, are efficient in their communication, thus making the most of their opportunity to debrief the experience of using English and readying themselves for the next one. In *reflective observation* and *abstract conceptualization*, L1 puts each student on the same footing; no one is at a disadvantage due to preexisting skills or experiences. Use of L1 allows learners of all levels to harness the power of peer instruction demonstrated by Lasry *et al.* (2009) whereas requiring the use of L2 in peer sessions would grant access only in accordance with English ability.

Furthermore, in *active experimentation*, students are all equally able to explore and expand their own boundaries. It is not a question of “What can you do?” in a broad, unspecified sense. Rather, the question is “Based on reflection, what do you want to do in order to take the next step?”. Woodward (2004) touches on the importance of “open-endedness,” as it “means that each student can respond to their own level and to their own taste” (p. 216). Hess (2001), too, writes on the value of open-endedness in the mixed-level language class, stating that, “open-ended exercises are infinitely more success-oriented” (p. 13). In the mixed-level class, flexibility and inclusiveness are significant equalizing factors.

To conclude this section, it is important to consider that Kolb’s model is scalable to time. In the yo-yo activity, the model provides a way of seeing and understanding what is occurring in the space of about 45 minutes. Zooming out, each instance of the yo-yo activity, which takes place five times during the semester, can be viewed as a single unit of experience. Between occurrences of the yo-yo, Kolb’s process is active to some degree. Now, however, students are not supported by the structure of the class; the extent to which they reflect on their experiences of the day is up to each person. This zooming out continues, as noted by Kohonen (1992), who writes, “The process of learning is seen as the recycling of experience at deeper levels of understanding and interpretation. This view entails the idea of lifelong learning” (17), and it suggests an opportunity to strengthen the yo-yo activity.

Improving the Yo-yo

Lacking from the yo-yo activity as presented here is the opportunity for students to record their experiences, observations and reflections. As I conducted the activity, insights uncovered as students spoke with their home partners seemed destined to fade from their memories as they left the classroom. Indeed, this is suggested in results of the survey I administered to both sections of the course (see Table 2). Of the 45 students who participated, 37 selected “Yes” in response to the question “Did yo-yo help your English?” while 8 students choose “I don’t know.” In general terms, 84% of students had the sense that yo-yo supported the development of their English language skills.

Table 2

Did yo-yo help your English?

“Yes.”	37
“No.”	0
“I don’t know.”	8

When asked for more specific information about changes from one conversation to the next in the series of three conversations per yo-yo session, students seemed less certain of its value. In response to the

question “Did you usually notice a difference between conversations 1, 2 and 3?”, 21 students selected “I don’t know.”; 11 students choose “No.”; and 11 selected “Yes.” Two students submitted ambiguous responses. The contrast between the clarity indicated by students about the overall value of yo-yo and the ambiguity about specific improvements during the activity suggests an opportunity to enhance the long-term benefit for students.

Table 3

Did you usually notice a difference between conversations 1, 2 and 3?

“Yes.”	11
“No.”	11
“I don’t know.”	21
No response	1
Unclear response	1

A short period of reflective writing at the end of class time might provide students the chance to carry forward their impressions from the day. Responding to prompts such as “Did you notice any changes between the three conversations today?” or “Did you remember and use any vocabulary words you had forgotten?”, students could ensure that there would be a record of, for example, vocabulary words they reactivated, or their sense of confidence during the third and final conversation of the day. Students could thereby develop a picture of their progress over time.

Conclusion

Though varying in degree, all groups of language learners can be described as being of mixed-level. In this paper, I have suggested that Kolb’s model of experiential learning provides an effective framework for creating classroom practices that support mixed-level language learners. To illustrate this, I have described a teaching technique that is grounded in the principles put forward by Kolb. In particular, I wished to highlight the value of creating processes that incorporate time for reflection. As Kolb (2005) writes, “Learning is like breathing; it involves a taking in and processing of experience and a putting out or expression of what is learned” (p. 208). Applied with care, Kolb’s model of experiential learning can support learners of varying ability levels by providing each person a place to start and a means of advancing.

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Appendix

This is a question set learners used in the yo-yo activity. Words in bold are target vocabulary items, words and phrases with which learners might not have been familiar. The italicized lines are sample answer prompts designed to ensure each student would be able to begin to respond to the questions.

Questions about International Experience

A Have you ever gone to another country?

B *Yes, I have. I went to... // No, I haven't, but...*

A Have any of your friends or family members **spent time** in another country?

B *Yes, my mother studied in England for a year. // No, I can't think of anyone.*

A Which country would you most like to visit?

B *I'd like to go to Spain because...*

A Would you like to study abroad?

B *Yes, I would. // No, I don't think so.*

A Would you like to work **overseas** someday?

B *Yes, I would. // No, I don't think so.*

A If you lived abroad for a year, do you think you would feel **homesick**?

B *Yes, I think so. // No, I don't think so.*

A If you lived in another country, what would you **miss** most about Japan?

B *I'd miss Japanese food. // I think I would miss my family.*

A Would you rather study, work or take a vacation in another country?

B *I'd rather study because... // I think I'd rather take a vacation because...*

A What are the biggest **benefits of spending time** in another country?

B *One of the biggest benefits is...*

A What do you think people from other countries like most about Japan?

B *I think they like... // I think they are interested in...*

A What is most difficult about living in Japan for someone from another country?

B *I think... is difficult for people from other countries because...*