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Gaining Insights from English Conversation Classes using Thematic Analysis: A Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to gain insights on English conversation classes provided in the Special English Lesson program in the University of Tokyo. In this program several English language schools were invited to give conversation classes on campus. Every semester five teaching assistants were hired to observe all the classes, and they wrote down their observations and comments in a notebook. More than 10 years notes has been collected but not yet analysed. In this pilot study, we apply qualitative thematic analysis to the teaching assistant notes collected in the winter semester of 2014, with a focus on intermediate conversation classes. We imported all the notes into a web-based qualitative data analysis tool called SATURATE. In total 316 paragraphs of text data were created in SATURATE and we coded the data following the standard process of thematic analysis. Eventually 6 themes emerged from the analysis: teaching methods, the personality of the teachers, the reaction of students, the progress of students, the problems of students, and suggested improvement for the classes. The findings suggested that a variety of teaching methods were used in the classes. Each method has its own characteristics and no method worked for all students. Teacher's personality and the discussion topics could affect the outcomes of the classes. Most of the students made significant progress in several aspects throughout the semester. In the meanwhile, three obstacles were identified: having difficulty in articulating their thoughts, having difficulty in understanding native speakers, and not being able to think in English. The students need to make continuous efforts to overcome these obstacles. We conclude that applying thematic analysis on teaching assistants' notes helped us gain insights from the English conversation classes, which offers rich implications for future research on effective teaching and learning in English education.

Keywords: English Education, Thematic Analysis, English Conversation Classes, Teaching Methods

Introduction

The objective of this study was to gain insights on English conversation classes by analysing the teaching assistant notes from the Special English Lesson (SEL) program in the University of Tokyo (http://sel-ut.com/). The SEL program was started in 2005 with the purpose of improving the English level of students in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. We invited 7 language schools to provide English conversation classes and TOEFL classes on campus. The English conversation classes were given by Berlitz Japan, Nichibei Kaiwa Kakuin, Athenee Francais, Berkeley House, and Simul Academy (5 schools), and the TOEFL classes were given by Agos Japan and TOEFL Seminar (2 schools). The level of the conversation classes ranged from intermediate to upper advanced, but the criteria for each level vary from school to school. Some classes may be cancelled if too few students

registered. On average 200 students enrolled in SEL very semester. To facilitate the operation and management of the program, we hire 5 teaching assistants (TA) every semester to help with the preparation of the classes, to observe the classes, and to organize the final presentation night at the end of the semester. One TA was assigned to a week day. Their duties include setting up all classrooms before the classes started, observing what was going on in the classes, and cleaning up the classrooms at the end. They usually spent 10-20 minutes in each class, depending on the total amount of classes on that day. The TAs were required to take notes during their observation of the classes, and our technical staff made comments on the notes. A photo of the TA notes is shown in Figure 1.
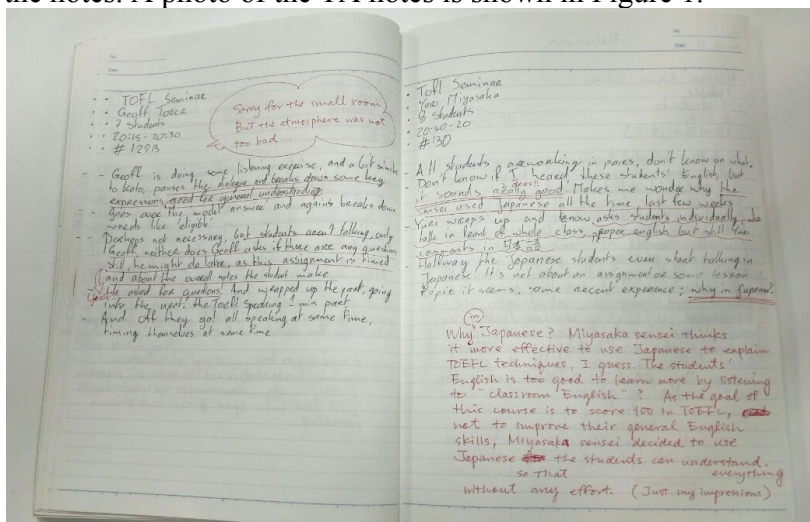

Figure 1. A photo of the TA notes.

More than 10 years of TA notes has been collected but not analysed. We believe that analysing these notes will help us gain insights on effective teaching and learning in English conversation classes. Therefore, we started our analysis from the TA notes in the winter of 2014. The classes offered in that semester are summarized in Table I. At current phase we focused on the intermediate to upper intermediate level, and we analysed the TA notes for the following 6 classes: Berlitz Japan Intermediate A2a (Mike), Nichibei Kaiwa Gakuin Intermediate (Nicholas) and Upper Intermediate (Kane, Charles), and Athenee Francais Intermediate (Daniel, Fabrizio). The names of the teachers are pseudonym.

Table 1
Language Schools and Courses Offered in 2014 Winter Semester

Language Schools	Courses	Criteria	Teacher
Berlitz Japan	Intermediate A2a	TOEIC 500	Mike
	Upper Advanced A2c	TOEIC 700	Martin
Nichibei Kaiwa Gakuin	Intermediate	TOEIC 500-640	Nicholas
	Upper Intermediate	TOEIC 640-780	Kane, Charles
	Advanced	TOEIC 780	Peter

Athenee Francais	Intermediate	TOEIC 400-650	Daniel, Fabrizio
	Advanced	TOEIC 650-860	Nathan, Sean
	Upper Advanced	TOEIC 860-990	Karl, Adam
Berkeley House	Advanced	TOEIC 650-800	Morgan

Since the TA notes resemble the transcripts of interviews in qualitative studies, we adopted the thematic analysis approach to analyse the TA notes. Through the analysis, we intended to answer the following questions:

(1) What methods did the teachers use in their classes?

(2) How does the personality of a teacher affect the outcomes of the classes?

(3) What reactions did the students have in the classes?

(4) What were the difficulties that students encountered in the classes?

(5) What progress did the students make after one semester?

(6) What did the TAs suggest to improve in the classes?

The findings from the thematic analysis on the TA notes provided rich implications to future studies on English education and the practices in English conversation classes.
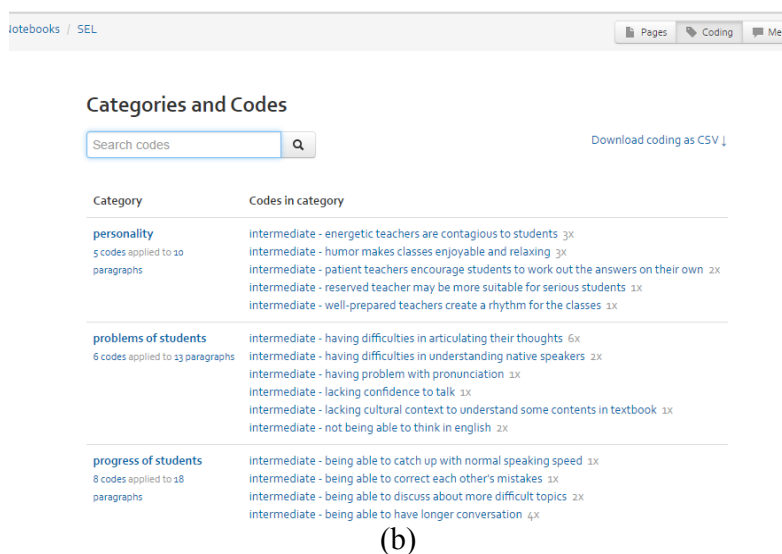
Research Methods

Data Collection

The data that we analysed is the notes written by our teaching assistants during the winter semester of 2014. One teaching assistant worked on one week day between 18:45 – 21:00. They usually spent 10-20 minutes in each class. We selected the TA notes for all intermediate classes, including Berlitz Japan Intermediate A2a (Mike), Nichibei Kaiwa Gakuin Intermediate (Nicholas) and Upper Intermediate (Kane, Charles), and Athenee Francais Intermediate (Daniel, Fabrizio). We use pseudonym for teachers to protect their privacy. In total 316 paragraphs of text data were collected.

(a)

(b)

Figure 2. Screenshots of the web-based qualitative analysis tool Saturate. (a) coding on a page; (b) all categories and codes for a notebook.

Data Analysis

We conducted a qualitative data analysis to gain insights from the TA notes on the intermediate-level English conversation classes. The analysis followed the process of a thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Firstly, a technical staff typed all the paragraphs in the TA notebook into an Excel Sheet with grammar mistakes corrected. Secondly, the first author imported all data to a web-based qualitative analysis tool named Saturate (http://www.saturateapp.com) and familiarized herself with the contents. Two screenshots of Saturate are shown in Figure 2. All the paragraphs were labelled with date, class ID, teacher's name, number of students and some thoughts for later on analysis. Excerpts with rich data were read and discussed with the remaining authors to discuss preliminary ideas based on which initial codes were generated. Thirdly, we analyzed the data through iterative coding. We did not define a coding schema beforehand but identified codes from actual data by repeatedly going through the paragraphs. After several iterations, we identified 44 codes. Finally, we grouped these codes into 6 themes: teaching methods, the personality of the teachers, the reaction of students, the progress of students, the obstacles for students, and suggested improvement for the classes. This was done through an affinity analysis where all authors grouped the codes through post-it notes on a whiteboard and discussed suitable themes and names for each theme. Each theme is described in detail in the next section. All data in the findings section has been anonymized through numerical identifiers.

Findings

In total 6 themes emerged from the thematic analysis. These themes covered the performance of the teachers (i.e. teaching methods, and the personality of teachers), the performance of the students (i.e. the reaction of the students in class, the progress that the students made throughout the semester, and the obstacle's for students) and the suggested improvement by the TAs. Through the following findings we attempt to show the insights that we gained from analysing the TA notes.

Performance of Teachers

In most of the English conversation classes, the teachers were in complete charge of what the students do and say. Therefore the performance of the teachers directly impact on the effectiveness of the class and the performance of the students. For the performance of the teachers, our TA wrote about their observations on the teaching methods, and how the teaching methods as well as the personality of the teachers may impact the performance of the students.

Teaching methods. A variety of teaching methods were used in the classes, ranging from traditional methods such as doing exercises in textbook and assigning homework to modern methods such as gamification and using information communication technologies. The typical methods recorded by the TA notes are presented below.

Doing exercises in textbook. Many teachers chose to follow the lines in the textbook. Doing exercise in textbook was the most widely used teaching method to help students build vocabulary and improve speaking. "*The class starts right away from the textbook. The students read some sentences. Charles then explains the contents and asks complementary questions! He is using the textbook a lot!*" (Charles).

Giving speaking tasks. Since the focus of the conversation classes was to improve the speaking level of the students, all teachers gave lots of speaking tasks in various forms during the classes. Group discussion is the most commonly used strategy to make students talk in the classes. "*At first students were asked to talk in pairs about their problems in life and to give advice to each other.*" (Fabrizio). Some teachers also asked students to give a presentation after the group discussion. "*Students were asked to present what they had talked about. This is very good because the presentation skills are actually different from discussion skills.*" (Daniel).

Some teachers liked to give examples or sample answers to help students start their discussions, or even suggesting useful sentence structures. "*At first, Fabrizio presented about all the houses he has lived in before. By presenting it, he stressed about ways to present: start with introduction and explain the points one by one. Students were asked to present their houses like that in pairs.*" (Fabrizio).

Whereas the students played a major role in discussions, some teacher chose to interact with students and to comment on their opinions, which in turn stimulated the students to talk more. Another effective way to encourage students to talk is "pealing the onion" by asking follow-up questions. "*The teacher asked questions to make them come up with detailed explanation.*" (Mike).

In some circumstances, not all students have equal chance to talk. For example, students who did not do the homework may feel unqualified to participate in the discussions. Students who were more familiar with the topic being discussed would naturally talk more than those who did not know much on the topic. "*Since Asuka did the homework, mainly Asuka was asked to answer the questions and others didn't have much chance to speak. Nicholas tried very hard to ask the others complementary questions like 'how do you feel about the passage'.*" (Nicholas).

Correcting grammar mistakes. English language learners at the intermediate level tend to make many grammar mistakes when they talk in English. A few teachers chose not to correct students' mistakes to avoid interrupting their discussions. However, our TA claimed that not correcting students' mistakes may hinder their progress in learning. "*The teacher did not correct them while they were speaking. Sometimes it was good: no interruption, but sometimes the students didn't know if it was a correct answer or not.*" (Kane). In comparison, some teachers immediately corrected students' grammar mistakes. "*The teacher was listening and correcting them when the students were discussing about selecting*

restaurants."(Mike). Sometimes, teachers chose not to interrupt the students right away, but to correct them after they finish talking. *"Nicholas was listening to them carefully but didn't interrupt. Instead of intervening conversation, he corrected students after their conversation was over."* (Nicholas). An alternative approach is to encouraged students to correct their own grammar mistakes. *"Nicholas gave his students opportunity to correct their answers first before he corrected them."* (Nicholas).

Correcting pronunciation. Many Japanese students have problems with their pronunciation when they speak English. However, not many teachers focused on pronunciation drills. One of the reasons is that most of the teachers had lived in Japan for many years and thus had been used to Japanese accent. Among all the teachers of intermediate-level classes, only one teacher was devoted to improving students' pronunciation and intonation. *"He was correcting their pronunciation and intonation! That is great! He also taught them about the speed, the stops, etc. while talking."* (Kane).

Focusing on listening comprehension. Despite of being conversation classes, many teachers believed that improving listening comprehension was indispensable for enhancing the overall English level of the students. This is extremely beneficial for the students, as listening is a weak points for many students. The strategies for listening practice include role play, dictation, or simply repeating after the audio. *"They listened to an audio. Later, students were asked to read the conversation out loud and to do it as real as possible."* (Daniel).

Building vocabulary. Words and phrases are the currency of communication. Teachers were aware that a robust vocabulary helps improve all areas of communication, and they used different approaches to help students expand their vocabulary. Sometimes teachers gave examples to explain the usage of new words or phrases, sometimes they asked the students to give examples by making sentences using the new words. *"I like the way Kane teaches vocabulary. He always gives examples, it is easy for students to understand the usage of the words."* (Kane).

Bridging culture gap. Most of the students had no experience abroad. Due to the lack of the cultural context, sometimes students found it hard to understand the topics in the textbook. The teachers tried their best to bridge the gap by explaining western culture to the students. *"They were discussing about cosmetic surgery. Very interesting topic! In America, in order to avoid discrimination to people's look, resumes should not include photo nor age. I didn't know that!"* (Fabrizio). In some cases, students were also encouraged to reflect on their own culture and to explain their culture to foreigner. *"Lots of Japanese words came out as the students try to explain the Japanese New Year activities. Mike asked the students to explain these words to a foreigner in English."* (Mike).

Sharing personal experiences with students. Some teachers were very eager to share their own experiences with students, which helped shorten the distance between students and the teacher. *"Students started with self-introduction. Then the students were allowed to ask one question to the teacher. This created a friendly atmosphere."* (Charles). However, this strategy did not always lead to positive outcomes. For example, one TA mentioned that *"Charles told really funny stories. His life is full of experience. But he should let students speak more."* (Charles).

Assigning homework. Since the classes offered in SEL are not part of the official university curriculum, many teachers do not assign homework and rather they tried to help students get the most of the program simply during the classes. However, a few teachers believed that homework could help students review what they had learnt in the classes and to prepare them for the upcoming classes. Among the 6 intermediate and upper-intermediate classes, homework was regularly assigned in 2 classes, given by Mike and Nicholas respectively. Typical homework tasks include preparing a presentation, writing a paragraph

to explain something in English, and answering questions in the textbook. "*Students were given homework. It's about teaching / explaining a favourite game in English.*" (Mike).

In addition to the traditional methods used for teaching English, several modern methods such as gamification (Figueroa-Flores, 2015) and information communication technology (Zainal, 2012; Samuel & Pulizala, 2014) were also adopted in the classes. For example, some teachers used gamification in their classes from time to time to increase fun and joy in the classroom. "*They were playing a game to think about the words in English during the break.*" (Mike). Some teachers are technology savvy and they integrated technologies into their teaching. "*He always uses websites to show examples to students. It is interesting.*" (Kane).

Personality of teachers. There is no doubt that teaching method is a core component of effective teaching. On the other hand, the personality of a teacher could either augment or diminish the effectiveness of a teaching method. From the TAs point of view, good teachers in SEL classes were energetic, humorous, patient, and well-prepared. Energetic teachers are contagious. They create a positive feeling in the class to keep the students motivated. Teachers with a good sense of humour light up the atmosphere of the classes. For students who were afraid of speaking out loud in class, patient teachers help them gain confidence. Well-prepared teachers created a rhythm for the class, which makes the class efficient and under good control. "*Nicholas was more active than students.*" (Nicholas). "*This class is really enjoyable. Kane made a lot of jokes. Sometimes we were too shy to speak out loud but the teacher tried to make jokes rather than taking it too seriously.*" (Kane). "*Nicholas corrected the students' pronunciation so patiently! Also, he was not just telling them the right answer directly but giving them hints and letting them think.*" (Nicholas). Whereas reserved teacher may not help boost the morale of students, the TAs acknowledged that they may be suitable for serious students. "*Charles has a reserved personality. They talked about serious topics, which made the class very serious. Maybe it is a good atmosphere for serious students!*" (Charles).

Performance of Students

The performance of students in the classes could be affected by many factors, such as the performance and the personality of the teachers, the energy and stress level of the students, and even the weather. In what follows we present the findings on the reactions of students in the classes, the progress that the students made through the semester, and the obstacles for students in their English learning.

Reactions of students. When the students were in good condition and good mood, they could make their best efforts to perform the tasks assigned by the teachers. "*The students were very keen and were trying their best to speak a lot. It is good for them.*" (Mike). In some classes, the students were very interactive. They laughed at teacher's jokes, they actively asked questions to the teacher, and they even helped each other when doing exercises. "*Today, the environment was quite friendly. Students were speaking, laughing and smiling...*" (Nicholas). "*Students even interrupted the teacher and made comments / asked questions!*" (Daniel). "*I observed that students have become more prompt in exchanging ideas. They discussed common phrases for giving advice to others.*" (Nicholas).

However, the reactions of students were very dynamic in classes. Even for the same individual student, his/her reaction could be different from class to class. During special periods such as before examination or after holiday, students were usually quiet and less responsive in class.

Topic selection may affect students' reaction. Students enjoyed talking on certain topics. They could easily have a conversation on the topics that they were familiar with or they were interested in. For the topic that they did not have much knowledge about, they

found it difficult to develop conversations. "*Use our daily life (restaurants, places) to give examples that made them easier to think about the topics.*" (Mike). "*Some of the students were having a hard time explaining superstitious customs of their countries.*" (Charles).

We also found that ***not all students were equally active in the classes***. Extrovert students were generally more talkative and interactive than introvert students. "*Only one student talked a lot: Kenta. Good for him. Other students were just listening.*" (Nicholas).

Progress of students. Most of the students made steadily progress throughout the semester. The main progress was manifested in the following four aspects.

Being able to talk more fluently. The most significant progress was the improvement in fluency. Students became equipped with ideas and phrases to develop discussions on certain topics after one-semester of practice. "*While one in a group was talking about his/her problems, the other was asked to give solutions. Wow they talked more fluently than before!*" (Daniel). The improved fluency could be attributed to the improved vocabulary level of the students. "*I think vocabulary level of the students in this class has improved drastically. They no longer take pauses while expressing their ideas. They are able to express in English more fluently and freely.*" (Nicholas)

Being able to have longer conversations. The students were also able to talk more and have longer conversations or group discussions. "*Students in this class also improved a lot!! They were talking in very long sentences and the talk lasted much longer than before!*" (Daniel).

Being able to discuss on difficult topics. During the classes, the teachers made great efforts to help the student develop their critical thinking and to encourage them to express their opinions. Because of that, the students gradually felt comfortable to discuss difficult and even sensitive topics. "*All students were discussing seriously on more difficult topics than previous class.*" (Kane).

Being more interactive in classes. When students became familiar with the teacher and with each other, they were more relaxed and were more eager to talk and to interact with the teacher as well as their peers. "*Students felt quite free to ask Fabrizio questions in class. It's much better than before!*" (Fabrizio).

Other improvement include being able to catch up with normal speaking speed, being able to correct other students' mistakes, and being more confident in giving presentations.

Obstacles for students. Regardless of the progress that students had made, they still encountered many difficulties in the classes and they would need to address some of the problems even in their future English studies. Three main obstacles identified from the TA notes are listed below.

Having difficulties in articulating their thoughts. Due to limited vocabulary, students at intermediate level often had difficulties in articulating their thoughts. "*The girl wearing glasses still seemed to have difficulties in expressing her thoughts in English.*" (Daniel).

Having difficulties in understanding native speakers. Many students were not used to the pronunciation and speaking speed of native speakers. Some students not only found it hard to catch the conversation in audios during listening comprehension exercise but also misunderstood what the teachers said in some circumstances. "*It seems that Nicholas asked students to write about their family. A girl misunderstood the question and she wrote about something else.*" (Nicholas)

Not being able to think in English. Some students had the habit of coming up with the answers in Japanese first and then literally translating them into English. "*She is trying to translate sentences from Japanese to English. Thus making mistakes such as 'long hours' (should be long time).*" (Nicholas).

Other obstacles noticed by the TAs include having problems with pronunciation, lacking confidence to talk, and lacking culture background to understand some contents in the textbooks. "*Kohei is very good with reading but needs work on pronunciation.*" (Nicholas). "*The girl with brown hair was not confident while talking in English. Maybe she needs more confidence?*" (Fabrizio). "*There were some rhymes in the textbook. Students were confused when they were asked to fill the blanks! These rhymes are not so popular in Japan!*" (Charles)

Suggested Improvement by Teaching Assistants

In addition to the observational notes, the TAs made a few suggestions which covered the following three aspects to enhance the quality of the classes.

Encouraging students to speak more. Some teachers were too talkative in classes that the students did not get much time to talk. The TAs believed that the teachers should give more free talking time to students, and they should especially encourage introvert students to speak out loud in classes. "*Charles speaks really funny stories, but he should let other students speak more. Extrovert students take part in his discussions but sometimes the introverts are just listening.*" (Charles).

Giving students more help. Some TA believed that the teachers should offer more help on basic skills such as sentence making. "*In my opinion, the teacher should help them to make sentences. It happened when I studied Japanese. I know the word (vocabulary) but I can't make sentences.*" (Nicholas).

Having better time management in classes. Sometimes the teachers would simply let the students talk without any specified time limit, and the TAs thought this was not good for the efficiency of the classes. "*Teacher gave them comments on what kind of questions would be more effective and can continue the conversation more easily. No time limit for making conversation for this practice. One group was talking too long and the other too short.*" (Nicholas).

Discussions and Future Work

The findings above have shown the insights that we gained by analysing the TA notes for English conversation classes. We will now discuss these findings within the context of English education and highlight opportunities for future research.

Effective Teaching in English Conversation Classes

Our findings suggested that the teachers in SEL classes adopted a variety of teaching methods. However, none of the methods worked in all situations. *There is no one-fit-all method when it comes to effective teaching in English conversation classes*, because the learning style and personality of the students are different and the strong points of teachers vary. For example, sharing personal experience may help to break the ice at the beginning of the semester and to shorten the distance between the teacher and the students. However, spending too much telling personal stories unavoidably reduced the talking time of the students. Another double-edge sword is homework assignment. On the one hand, homework helps students review what they have learnt in the classes. Assigning homework has been an important approach of engaging students outside of the classroom (Rosario et al., 2015; Hayward, 2010). From this point of view, homework is preferred for English teaching. On the other hand, we also noticed that failing to complete homework was one of the main reasons for students to drop out from the classes. Since the teachers usually would discuss about the homework at the beginning of the next class, the students who did not complete the homework would not be able to participate in the discussion unless the teacher pays special

attention to involve those students. Students felt guilty and excluded, and eventually quit attending the class. The pros and cons of homework that we identified in SEL classes echoes and complement previous studies on the role of homework (Amiryousefi, 2016).

Therefore, *what matters to a student is the matching between the student and the characteristics of the class.* A class can be characterized by many factors, such as the teaching method used in the class, the contents of the class, the personality of the class, and even the personality of other students. As mentioned in the findings, the selection of the discussion topic may impact the reactions of the students in class. Students are more talkative and interactive if they are familiar with the topics being discussed, and vice versa. Therefore, we recommend language schools to tailor the contents of their textbooks to the needs of the students. If the teacher realized that the students were not familiar with the topic being discussed, the teacher should give more hints and suggest useful phrases to help students make conversations, like what Mike did in his class. The personality matching between students and teachers is also important; it could even become a dominant factor on the performance of the students. Our findings showed that the TAs believed that energetic and humorous teachers created positive atmosphere in the classes, which boost the morale and motivation of the students. In the meanwhile, the TAs also acknowledged that serious teachers may be a good choice for serious students. We conclude that the language schools should not simply decide on the placement of a student based on his/her English level. Instead, there should be careful matching between the characteristics of the student (e.g. learning goal, English level, motivation, personality) and those of the class (e.g. teaching method, content, teacher's personality). However, how to match students and classes in consideration of various factors (especially teaching methods and personality) requires future studies in the domain of personalized English education. Artificial intelligence and data mining techniques may be applied to achieve the goal of quick and automatic matching between students and teachers.

Effective Learning in English Conversation Classes

Shifting the focus to the students, our findings suggested that many students in the intermediate and upper intermediate classes made concrete progress after one-semester of continuous practice and training. Little by little they could have longer conversation over a wide range of topics, and they could use more advance vocabulary and more complicated sentence structures to express their thoughts. They could talk more fluently with fewer pauses at the end of the semester. As the interpersonal distance shortened, the students were more relaxed in the classes and they were more eager to interact with the teachers as well as with their peers.

The reactions of students in classes were not homogeneous. Active students and shy students always coexist in a class. Extrovert students were generally more talkative and interactive than introvert students, and they looked more motivated and were eager to improve their English level. However, it remains unknown whether the extrovert students benefited more from the classes and achieved more improvement than the introvert students. Even for the same individual student, his or her reactions could be different from class to class. We found that students generally talked more if they were familiar with or interested in the topic being discussed.

Despite of the progress that students achieved, our analysis also identified several obstacles. The biggest obstacle was that many students had difficulties in articulating their thoughts due to their limited vocabulary and sometimes also due to their poor pronunciation. Indeed, vocabulary building requires long-term continuous efforts; one semester may be insufficient for some students to make significant improvement. Another obstacle was that

students found it difficult to understand native speakers, partly due to the lack of vocabulary and partly due to the fast speed of native speakers. Having difficulties in both speaking and listening is not a coincidence. The close relationship between aural and oral skills has been identified in previous studies in the domain of applied linguistics (Vandergrift, 2007; Bozorgian, 2012). Previous findings have shown that enhancing listening could support the improvement on speaking in English learning (Astorga-Cabezas, 2015).   Our study demonstrated that listening comprehension was a weak point of intermediate level English learners and should be improved together with speaking. The third obstacle was that some students were not able to think in English. They were so dependent on their mother tongue that they tended to think about how to say something in Japanese first and then translate it to English. For these students, thinking in their mother language hindered the progress of their language learning because they kept on using unnatural sentence structures. Our finding echoes previous study by Trimble (Trimble, 1993), where he mentioned that the transition from thinking in the native language to thinking in English was a major obstacle for intermediate-level English learners. He argued that this transition must be made as early as possible in language training and recommended teachers to correct the unnatural expressions used by students. Though Trimble focused mainly on English writing classes, the feedback approach could be applied to conversation classes with minor adjustment.

Limitations of This Study

We have presented useful findings to benefit future studies on effective teaching and learning in English conversation classes. However, the current study has its limitations in several aspects. First, we only analysed the TA notes of one semester. The findings thus mainly reflected the opinions of the five TAs who worked in the winter semester of 2014. It would be interesting to conduct a longitude analysis on the TA notes over the span of 10 years. Second, we only focused on classes at the intermediate and upper intermediate level. Therefore, it remains unknown whether the obstacles identified in the findings were specific to English learners at the intermediate level or they were universal to English learners at all levels. If the answer is the former, the follow-up questions could be (1) how do the obstacles encountered by the advanced-level students differ from those encountered by the intermediate-level students? and (2) is such difference a matter of language level, or is it related to other factors such as learning style and motivation? Third, the TA notes were the only data source for this analysis. We may uncover interesting trends if more data are integrated to the analysis such as questionnaire results and teachers' evaluation. We will focus on addressing these limitations in our future work.

Conclusions

In this study we analysed the teaching assistant notes of six English conversation classes using thematic analysis. All the classes were between intermediate and upper intermediate level. We found that the teachers used a variety of teaching methods in their classes. However, none of the methods was effective in all situations. The personality of teachers could affect the teaching outcomes. As for the students, the extrovert students were generally more talkative and interactive in classes than the introvert students. Even for the same individual student, his/her performance could vary from class to class depending on various external factors. After one-semester of continuous practice and training, many students made concrete progress in their overall English level and conversation skills. However, we also found that three main problems persist: (1) having difficulties in articulating their thoughts; (2) having difficulties in understanding native speakers; (3) not being able to think in English.

This study offered rich implications to further studies on effective teaching and learning in English education.

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