

ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION IN AN ONLINE EFL CLASS

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the novel 2019 coronavirus has brought about something of a revolution, and at great speed, in the education world. Writing in March this year, Hodges et al. (2020) state that “the speed with which this move to online instruction is expected to happen is unprecedented and staggering” (p.2). Such tectonic shifts in such a short time clearly require great resources of adaptability from educators and students alike. For English language teachers in Japan, this pedagogical turbulence can serve to exacerbate many of the problems they were already grappling with in a pre-pandemic world. One of these problems being how to encourage reticent students to participate more actively in their English lessons.

PARTICIPATION IN AN EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING (ERT) CONTEXT

Hodges et al. (2020) claim “the temptation to compare online learning to face-to-face instruction in these (emergency) circumstances will be great” (p.2) but go on to argue that this is not helpful for a number of reasons. However, they do provide some suggestions for evaluating the effectiveness of emergency remote teaching (ERT). For teachers, they suggest asking “did learners achieve the intended knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes that were the focus of the instructional experience?” While for students, they note “issues such as interest, motivation, and engagement are directly connected to learner success and so would be possible evaluation foci” (p.7). Bao (2020) likewise looks at the requirements for successful ERT. She provided a case study of Peking University’s ERT efforts and identified five major principles for success, among them “high-quality participation to improve the breadth and depth of student’s learning” (p.1). The acquisition of skills, the degree of motivation and engagement, and participation, despite a move *out* of the classroom, remain vital.

STUDENTS

While it is not possible in this article to discuss the nature and dangers of stereotyping students, it is nevertheless possible to adumbrate a number of general observations about Japanese learners of English. Cohen (1995) claims that Japanese students are often viewed by their teachers as being passive, unwilling to contribute, and excessively concerned with errors. Writing almost a decade later, Saito and Ebsworth (2004) discuss a fairly comprehensive list of cultural differences that can often cause tension between Western language teachers and their Japanese students. Traits they identified as being common among Japanese students included a preference for indirect speech, an unwillingness to challenge either their teachers or peers, a deep concern with group cohesion, and widespread perfectionism. They further claimed that teacher expectations around challenging a student’s answer can be problematic. While a teacher might anticipate such a challenge generating fresh and original ideas, such challenges are likely to be unexpected for students and can often lead to intense embarrassment. These and other

factors can therefore lead to a noticeable unwillingness on the part of students to participate in class, or at least to appear so.

THE 5-SECOND RULE

As part of an effort to counteract such reticence, I introduced the 5-second rule into my online classes. Robbins (2018) claims that whenever one has an impulse to act on a goal, they must physically do something within five seconds or inhibitions will take over and the impulse will be lost. The way to ensure action is to use what she calls the 5-second rule. One begins counting backwards from five and upon hitting "1-go!" they must push themselves into action. She explains that "this is how you do the hard stuff – the work that you don't feel like doing, or you're scared of doing, or you're avoiding" (Robbins, 2018, para.10). The task in my classes took place in two stages.

Stage One

Students were given a short reading that explained the 5-second rule (see appendix). After completing the reading, students discussed with a partner the following questions:

- 1) How would you explain the 5-second rule to someone?
- 2) Please brainstorm some possible ways you could use the 5-second rule when learning English. For example, "I could use it when I want to answer a question."

Finally, through a class discussion, all of the ideas for question 2 were gathered onto one document available to everyone on a digital platform used daily for class materials.

The priority of this exercise was to activate students towards thinking of ways they might use the rule to aid their learning, and in particular their participation online. Answers for question 2 typically focused on very broad areas such as: when wanting to ask a question in class; when wanting to give opinions but feeling afraid; when fearing other students would see their answers as wrong; when wanting to use English outside of class, for example talking to a foreigner; or when not wanting to join the class.

Stage Two

For the second stage of this activity, students were asked to look back at the shared document the class created and to reflect on where they had the most difficulty taking action. They were then challenged to make use of the 5-second rule at least once a week in trying to be more active in these areas. In their weekly reflection journals they were asked – "can you describe one example of when you used the 5-second rule this week?"

More informally, I kept the 5-second rule present as much as possible during class time. On any occasion in which a question to the class was met with silence, I would energetically begin counting backwards from 5.

STUDENT RESPONSE TO THE 5-SECOND RULE

The reaction of the students to the 5-second rule has been very positive. General feedback from students suggest that not only are they making use of the rule during class time, they are actually transferring it outside of the class to assist them with tasks such as homework. On the regular

occasions when I use it to trigger participation in class I am invariably met with the voices of a number of students seeking to get involved. The speed with which the 2020 pandemic has changed the learning environment means that the findings here are purely anecdotal. However, an opportunity clearly exists for a more systematic survey of how students feel about the rule. For now, it appears to be a valuable tool in my efforts to encourage participation in my online EFL classes.

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Appendix A

The 5 Second Rule is simple. **If you have an instinct to act on a goal, you must physically move within 5 seconds or your brain will kill it.**

The moment you feel an instinct or a desire to act on a goal or a commitment, use the Rule.

When you feel yourself hesitate before doing something that you know you should do, count 5-4-3-2-1-GO and move towards action.

There is a window that exists between the moment you have an instinct to change and your mind killing it. It's a 5 second window. And it exists for everyone.

If you do not take action on your instinct to change, you will stay stagnant. You will not change.

But if you do one simple thing, you can prevent your mind from working against you. You can start the momentum before the barrage of thoughts and excuses hit you at full force.

What do you do?

Just start counting backwards to yourself: 5-4-3-2-1.

The counting will focus you on the goal or commitment and distract you from the worries, thoughts, and excuses in your mind.

As soon as you reach "1" – push yourself to move.

This is how you push yourself to do the hard stuff – the work that you don't feel like doing, or you're scared of doing, or you're avoiding.

That's it. 5 seconds is all it takes.

If you don't act on an instinct within that 5 second window, that's it. You're not doing it.