EMBRACING THE CHALLENGE: ACTIVITIES FOR DEVELOPING PARTICIPATION IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

A common complaint heard from English teachers in Japan is that their students are unwilling to participate actively in class due in large measure to fears surrounding mistakes. Over time, I have devised numerous activities designed to promote a more positive and participatory mindset in class. These activities are based on three fundamental principles: English is a set of skills that can be improved through practice; mental tools exist that will allow students to participate in class without requiring them to completely eradicate their fears; and a more accepting and positive approach to mistakes is necessary for success. This article discusses three specific activities that were introduced into the classroom in an effort to promote this mindset and to achieve more active participation from students. Student reflection journals and survey results are analysed in order to discuss the validity of these principles and the success of their application.

Keywords: learner autonomy, participation, growth mindset, mistakes

INTRODUCTION

For teachers entering a Japanese EFL classroom, unforeseen challenges in relating to their students consistently arise. In fact, "many U.S. teachers who teach ... in Japanese colleges encounter difficulties in dealing with their Japanese students, due in part to the gap between culturally influenced teacher-held expectations and student participation patterns" (Saito & Ebsworth, 2004, p. 111). Japanese students are often viewed by their teachers as being passive, unwilling to contribute, and excessively concerned with errors (Cohen, 1995). However, such blanket characterisations have been seen by scholars as extremely reductive and therefore as problematic (Holliday, 2003, 2006; Kubota, 2018). It is enough to say that reticent or unmotivated learners are likely to be widely encountered across teaching contexts (Little, 2007). While this paper demonstrates the effectiveness of several activities carried out in a Japanese classroom, it is my belief that the activities will be broadly applicable across contexts and regardless of cultural norms and values. Therefore, a more constructive way to look at the problem is through the lens of learner autonomy and empowering learners to take more active control of their learning.

After analysing student reflections over several years, using journals, interviews, class discussions, observations, and a range of other various informal methods, one word in particular seemed to appear to me with distressing regularity: *fear.* All too often students spoke of feeling afraid of making mistakes, of feeling a degree of vulnerability such that they were significantly

impeded in their efforts to communicate in English. Clearly such levels of fear are counterproductive to effective learning, and any measures that allow students to gain back control of their learning from this fear can be viewed as beneficial.

In an effort to counteract this prevailing reticence among students, I began to introduce a range of activities—derived from sports, philosophy, business, and psychology—into my classroom. Below is a summary of three such activities.

LITERATURE & RATIONALE

Holec (1981) defined learner autonomy very simply as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning," (p. 3) but Benson (2007) conceded that there is some difficulty in nailing down a completely comprehensive definition. Despite this difficulty, Little (2007) noted that Holec's notion of the learner taking charge of their own learning can be seen to be the common thread that runs through the literature and says that, "language learner autonomy is not an optional extra, sometimes required by the way in which learning is organised, but belongs at the very centre of language teaching theory and practice" (p. 27). In his effort to more closely examine learner autonomy, Benson (1997) broke it down into three separate versions. 'Technical' versions involve the student simply in learning outside of a classroom and independent of a teacher. 'Psychological' versions view autonomy as centred on attitudes and abilities which allow the learner to take more control over their learning. Finally, 'political' versions focus on control over the processes and content of learning.

However it is conceived in detail, Pennycook (1997) warned that teachers seeking to "encourage 'learner autonomy' universally, without first becoming acutely aware of the social, cultural and political context in which [they are] working, may lead at best to inappropriate pedagogies and at worst to cultural impositions" (p. 44). Littlewood (1999) agreed, saying that teachers "need to match the different aspects of autonomy with the characteristics and needs of learners in specific contexts" (p. 71). Benson's three versions therefore add a subtlety to the concept of learner autonomy that significantly broadens the scope for the aforementioned matching of different aspects of autonomy to the characteristics and needs of different learners and contexts. In particular, the psychological version centred on attitudes fits well with the activities discussed below.

All of the various tasks introduced into the classroom revolved around three key principles: 1) English as a set of skills able to be improved with practice; 2) practice will create various levels of anxiety and even fear in students, therefore tools for pushing past this fear will be helpful; and finally, 3) practice entails obstacles and the potential for failure and, therefore, how the students conceive of obstacles is vitally important. These principles were derived from a number of key sources and texts. It should be made very clear, however, that none of the activities outlined below should be seen as a pure representation of the beliefs of the authors of those texts. The principles and activities discussed here are the author's own, inspired only by the sources stated, but not representing them.

The tasks summarised below represent the three foundational tasks created to establish each of the principles in the minds of the students. Each task operates in two stages. The first stage is concerned with consciousness-raising and involves a one-off exercise to introduce the principle to the students. Following this, students are required to carry out an ongoing task throughout the semester that hopes to reinforce the principle and bring about some lasting change in mindset and behaviour.

Task 1: Mindset

Dweck (2017), in her book *Mindset,* wrote of two mindsets—the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. A fixed mindset involves believing that one's own qualities and traits are set and unchanging. For example, one has a fixed IQ, a fixed moral character, or a fixed language learning ability. This mindset induces a strong need for people to prove themselves, particularly in relation to others, as each quality is linked indissolubly with a person's identity. She observes, "every situation is evaluated: *Will I succeed or fail? Will I look smart or dumb? Will I be accepted or rejected? Will I feel like a winner or a loser?"* (Dweck, 2017, p. 6). This threat to identity often induces one to avoid situations that might challenge one's sense of identity.

Alternatively, a growth mindset is based on the belief that one's initial abilities and aptitudes are merely a starting point. They are "things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others. Although people may differ in every which way . . . everyone can change and grow through application and experience" (Dweck, 2017, p. 7). This obviously does not mean that everyone can be a Mozart or Einstein, merely that each person has an unknown potential that they can actively take steps towards achieving. It also relieves much of the burden of having to prove oneself to others. Indeed, why waste time trying to prove how wonderful you are when you could be learning and improving?

Task 2: The 5-Second Rule

The next step was to acknowledge that students might find this new effort to practice frightening. Previous students had written and spoken regularly of feeling significant degrees of fear. The goal of the next activity was to provide students with a mental tool which would help them to push through their anxiety. Robbins (2018) claimed 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 claims 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).

Task 3: Obstacle as Goal

The third principle aims to introduce students to a new more constructive approach to obstacles and challenges. Lickerman (2012) claimed that, "all of us have the capacity to make use of any circumstance, no matter how awful, to create value" and we do this "not just by reframing adversity . . . but by actually overcoming it" (pp. 91–92). Likewise, Frankl (1946/2008) said that, "what man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather a striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal" (p. 10). Finally, Maxwell (2013) urged readers to see that "mistakes are not

failures. They are proof that we are making an effort. When we understand that, we can more easily move out of our comfort zone, try something new, and improve" (p. 80). The key idea is that mistakes are to be welcomed. To live in a state of mistake-free perfection really indicates a state of mistake-free failure. Mistakes, discomfort, embarrassment, fear: these tell us that we are engaging with our current limits, our goal being to push ourselves past them.

CONTEXT

The students to whom the activities were given consisted of two Freshman English classes who met four times weekly. The total number of students was 41 (20 in one class and 21 in the other). Many of the students exhibited marked reticence in class and an obvious unwillingness to commit errors. They were also often reluctant to use direct speech to the point that it became a joke in both classes that the words 'maybe' and 'almost' were prohibited when asked a yes/no question. Such behaviour had been a recurring feature of classes which I had previously taught and is not uncommon in Japanese EFL classrooms (Saito & Ebsworth, 2004). It was to address such issues that the following exercises were devised.

The activities were introduced over one semester of the Freshman English course. Students completed three reflection journals at equal intervals throughout the semester where they were asked to share their opinions on the various activities. At the completion of the semester, the students were then asked to complete a survey which provided a more quantitative summary of their attitudes towards the activities.

THE TASKS

Task 1: Mindset
Stage One
In small groups, students were asked to discuss the following questions:

> 1) Which club were you a member of in high school? (If you were not in a club, what was a hobby/sport/activity that was important to you?)
> 2) What things did you do to improve your abilities?
> 3) Were you the best player/member in your club?
> 4) Did this affect your motivation and efforts to improve?

Following this, the class discussed the answers to each question. Through these discussions I attempted to draw the students' attention to the fact that in their club activities (most answers centred on sports, music, and art) the road to improvement lay through practice. None of the students claimed to be the best participant in their club, but likewise, very few claimed to be adversely affected by this fact in their willingness to practice. I then asked the students to think about learning English in the same way. They had all studied English for six to seven years at junior and senior high school, and yet in previous classes most students had claimed that the way to improve their English was through further study. I asked them how many soccer players had become the best through reading about soccer? How many cellists had become the best

through studying the cello? I encouraged the students to think of practice as being the next step on their way to mastery (or at least improvement) of English. The students must not compare themselves to others, but rather to themselves the day before. This was how they were to measure their abilities. The students were then told that beginning in the next class they would be given the opportunity to try this mindset through a continuing activity.

Stage Two
At the beginning of most subsequent classes, students were required to make pairs. I then provided them with a topic about which they were to talk for between two to five minutes. Some topics were intended to be easy and to gently lead the students into the task (examples being 'travel is the best education', 'my greatest fear', 'my dream vacation'), while others were intended to stretch their abilities and therefore to be much more challenging (examples being 'fire', 'peanuts', and 'the colour purple'). As the students grew more confident and able over time, the time limit was gradually increased.

Task 2: The 5-Second Rule
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: How would you explain the 5-second rule to someone? Please brainstorm some possible ways you could use the 5-second rule when learning English. For example, "I could use it to get started doing my homework". 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.

Question 1 was plainly designed to check comprehension of the reading, but the priority of this exercise was to activate students towards thinking of ways they might use the rule to aid their learning. Types of answers for question 2 included: when wanting to ask a question in class; when I want to give my opinion but feel afraid; when I am afraid the other students will think I am wrong; when I want to use English outside of class, for example talking to a foreigner; when I don't want to go to class.

Stage Two
As part of regular assessment, students were required to submit a reflective journal each month. They reflected on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. The prompts for each of the four weekly reflections were the same. For 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. They also had a new prompt added to the weekly reflections in their journals: "Please describe one example of when you used the 5-second rule this week."

Task 3: Obstacle as Goal
Stage One
A high number of students had spoken of their shortcomings in English and how anxiety had played a role in inhibiting their ability to communicate. A class discussion was initiated, and

students were made aware of the widespread and common nature of anxiety among students, especially among freshman students. Then, students were encouraged to share their experiences of fear and anxiety when learning. Finally, students were shown a visual representation of anxiety and possible interaction with it (see Fig. 1). Students were asked to conceive of their anxiety in different situations as a precursor to improvement. Without this kind of discomfort there can be no improvement as the discomfort indicates that they are in the process of improvement and learning, but only *if* they are aware of this fact and make use of it.

Fig. 1. Trying to Learn Without Challenges
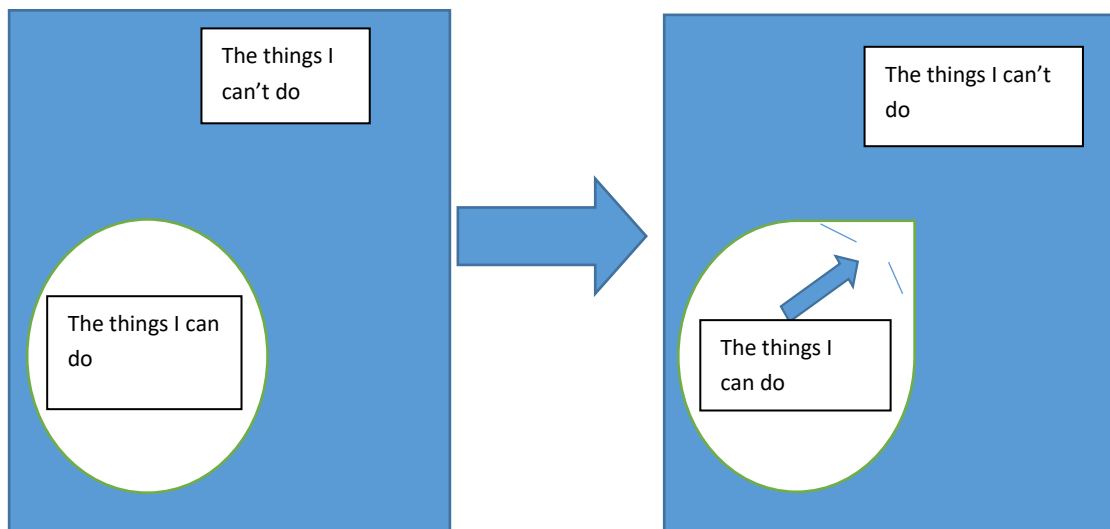
Stage Two
The second part of this activity again involved the students writing in their reflective journals. This time the prompt was only given once, in the monthly reflection: "Please describe an example of one 'failure' you experienced in your language learning this month. In what way can this experience be seen as something positive which you can use in your future learning?" The aim of this activity was to get the students to reflect back on their learning experiences with a *growth* mindset. I wanted the students to view the obstacles they encountered as triggers for learning and therefore a positive experience.

STUDENT RESPONSE

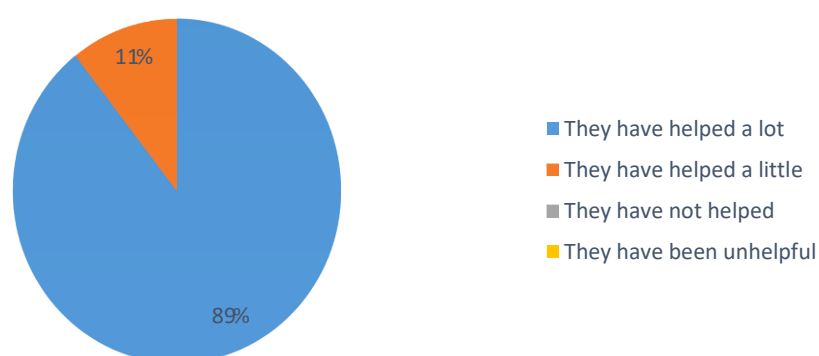### Mindset - Practice Discussions
Task 1 centred on mindset and instilling a belief in students that English was a set of skills that could be improved through practice. To that end, practice discussions were implemented at the beginning of each lesson. All names used are pseudonyms.

The discussions, predictably, proved a significant challenge initially. For example, in the first reflection journal of the semester, in response to the question, "what is the most difficult thing

you learned this week?," Mie wrote, "I think the most difficult thing is conversation in English with classmate. I've never talked 3~4 minutes in English". Likewise, Ryota said, "The hardest part was talking in English. I only talked in Japanese about the topic that I couldn't speak well in English. . . . It's hard to say what you want to say in English." However, when asked at the completion of the semester whether students felt that these discussions had helped to improve their speaking skills, a large majority of respondents felt that they had helped a lot.

Fig. 2. Improvement Through Practice Discussions

Do you think that the practice discussions have helped you to improve your speaking skills?

- They have helped a lot
- They have helped a little
- They have not helped
- They have been unhelpful

The practice discussions were conceived of as a tool to help students to encounter their communication limits and to expand them through their own efforts (see Fig. 1) and were therefore specifically not designed as fluency activities. As Nation and Newton (2009) have argued, one of the requirements of fluency activities is that they should not require the learner to engage with unfamiliar content, but by design, many of the discussion topics introduced in class did require students to do this. As a possible consequence of this, the number of students who answered that the discussions had helped them a lot to feel more confident when speaking English was significantly less than those who felt that it had helped to improve their skills. While the proportion of students who claimed that the discussions had not helped them at all was extremely low, the decrease in this majority was notable.

A representative comment was made by Ami in journal 3, who said, "The most difficult thing this week was warm up discussion. Recent topics are getting more difficult, but I am not able to clarify my opinion more than before. In other words, I can no longer relax." Yuna said, "Warm up discussion was the most difficult. The difficult topic was confused me again and again. I tried to my best, but I was not able to think deeply and express my opinions." Clearly, the elements of confusion and an inability to relax have the potential to negatively impact on confidence or at least hinder its growth. One possible conclusion to draw from this is that treating the practice discussions more explicitly as fluency activities might have the potential to encourage the

growth of confidence in students and subsequently to improve participation, the ultimate driver behind all of the activities listed here.

Fig. 3. Increased Confidence Through Practice Discussions

Do you think that these discussions have helped you to feel more confident when speaking English?

- They have helped a lot
- They have helped a little
- They have not helped
- They have been unhelpful
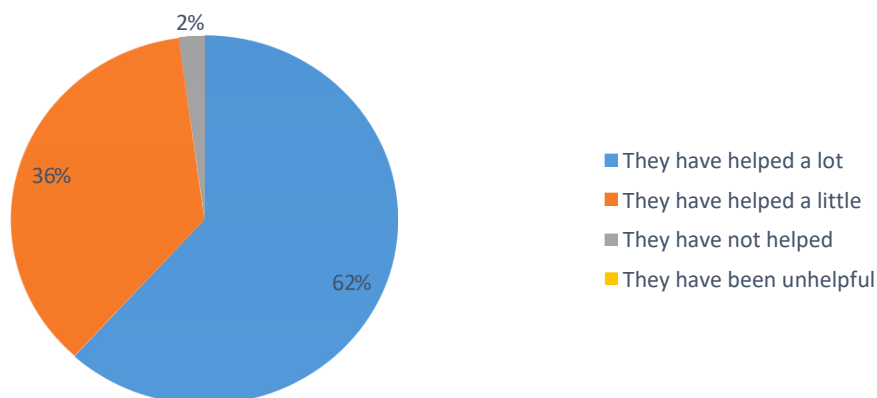
The 5-Second Rule

Student responses to the 5-second rule activities were similarly positive. When asked whether the 5-second rule was a useful tool for learning English, 96% of respondents claimed that, to a greater or lesser degree, it was. Risa, in journal 3, said of the 5-second rule, "I used this rule for answering teacher question... I felt a little afraid of failure, but I think I was able to announce my answer openly. The frequency of answers has increased compared to April." Naomi said:

> I used the 5-second rule when I spoke up in FE class. First, I hesitated to say. But I remembered I regretted when I didn't say before. So I tried to say. After this class, I felt really good! I felt deeply it was important to try anything.

Similarly, Kae wrote:

> Before finishing class, Matt asked us 'Do you have any questions?' but, I couldn't raise my hand because I became shy. So, I asked one question after finished this class. . . . I want to master 5-second rule to be able to use without become shy.

What stands out on reading reflections of this kind, is the repeated mention of terms like "shy", "hesitate", and "afraid". Clearly, the students are not claiming to have conquered their fear. What these responses indicate is that the 5-second rule is acting as an efficient tool to help them push past it and into a more active style of participation. The students recognise and acknowledge that fear remains. However, they now have at least one tool to deploy against it.

Fig. 4. The 5-Second Rule as a Tool to Improve English Skills

Do you think that the 5-second rule is a useful tool to help you to improve your English skills?
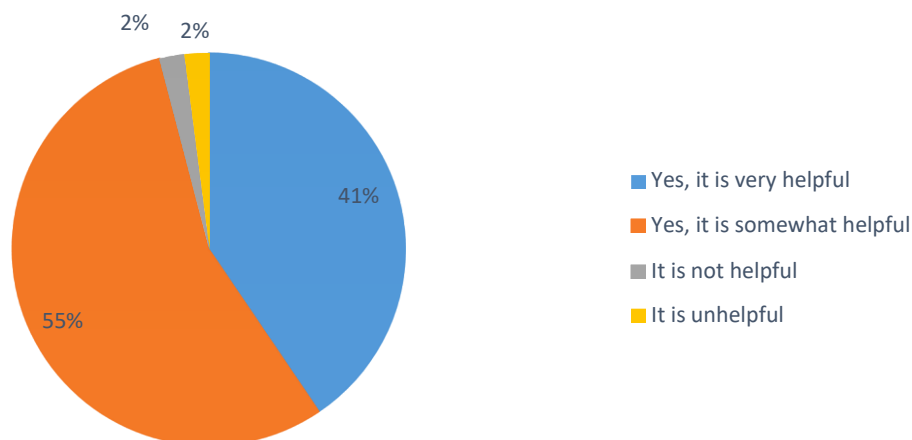
Just how useful the 5-second rule was to students is reflected in the fact that all respondents claimed to use the tool at least once a class, with approximately 10% claiming to use it four or more times per class. However, a 100% positive response in any survey should prompt a sceptical eye and one caveat needs to be acknowledged. Clearly, the possibility of participant bias exists in these statistics. Very plausibly, some students could have been attempting to provide the kind of answer that they suspected the teacher would want. However, the positivity and detail provided in many of the students' journals as they reflected on their use of the rule provides some reasonable degree of immunity against such a charge. In one example, Momoka wrote:
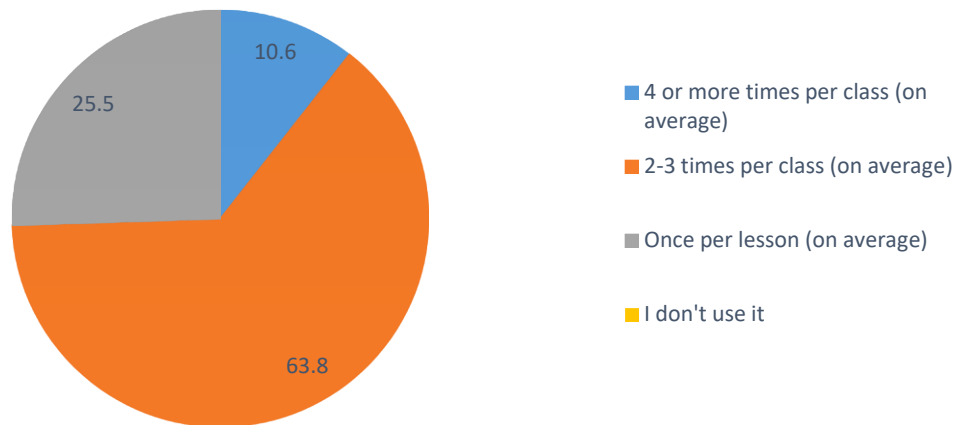
> I used this rule when I made a presentation. I could answer and ask some questions in this presentation. I tried to help the group members or answer positively from other classmates questions. I could not do like this thing until now. But, I could do it. This thing was my big growth. 5-second rule let me be positive. So, I will use it when I start new things or encourage myself.

Also in Journal 3, Nobu wrote:

> In the first class of this unit, I was able to tell my opinions well. Because I used 5-second rule. I think it's very very very useful. And if I use this, I can be positive and active! So, I will continue to use this many times when I speak and study English.

Fig. 5. Use of the 5-Second Rule

How often do you use this rule to help you when you are studying in class?

- ■ 4 or more times per class (on average)
- ■ 2-3 times per class (on average)
- ■ Once per lesson (on average)
- ■ I don't use it

Obstacle as Goal

As mentioned earlier, a general unwillingness to make mistakes, particularly in front of peers, is a relatively deeply ingrained characteristic of many Japanese students. The students' responses to the activities over the course of the semester have proven that these activities are certainly not a panacea for this attitude towards mistakes. In fact, at the completion of the semester, approximately 15% of students stated that their comfort in relation to making mistakes remained at about the same level it had been at the beginning of the semester. For example, Mahiro spoke very honestly when asked, "Compared with the beginning of the semester, are you more comfortable or less comfortable making mistakes?" He responded, "I think little bit more comfortable than before. But almost the same. I'm depressed because everyone speak English very well than me. So I should make an effort to have confidence myself." Yurina also felt that not a lot had changed when writing, "I think comfortable compared with the begging of the semester. And it may not change much but it has grown a little."

Fig. 6. Comfort Level with Mistakes

Compared with the beginning of the semester, are you more comfortable or less comfortable making mistakes?
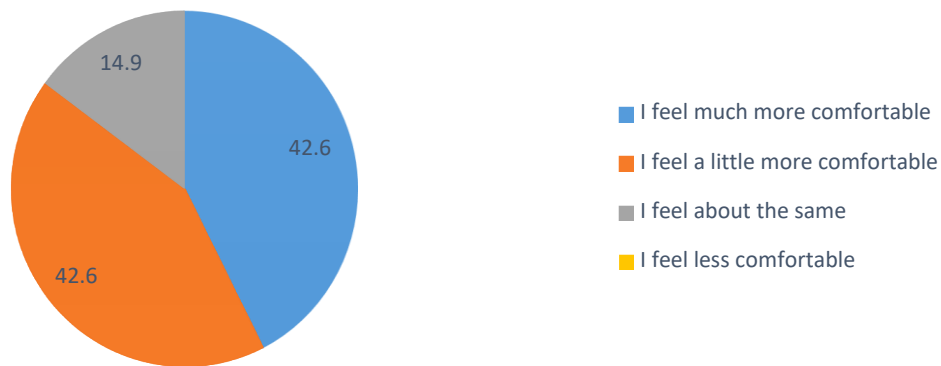

However, when asked how likely they were to participate in a group discussion in class, over 60% of respondents answered that they were much more likely to participate with only 2% answering that the likelihood was about the same as at the beginning of the semester. This appears consistent with the results obtained from the questions concerning the 5-second rule. Again, students are not uniformly claiming to have banished their fears around making mistakes. A large minority even claim to have made little or no progress in this area. But what many of these students are demonstrating is a willingness to participate *despite* their fear.

Of students who claimed to feel much more likely to participate, a representative comment came from Miyu, who said:

> At the beginning of this class, I was always afraid of making mistakes. I also felt embarrassed when I made a mistake. But I could find that it was a big mistake. I learned that making mistakes can improve my English. That is very positive. So after realizing this, I decided to try anything. And I'm no longer afraid of making mistakes. By making mistakes I can learn a lot of new things. And I can develop the ability to speak English positively. After I learned them, I really happy to make mistakes. So, in and out of this class, I tried to speak English as possible as I could. And now, I really love to speak.

Fig. 7. Changes in Group Discussion Participation Levels

Compared to the beginning of the semester, how likely are you to participate in a group discussion in class?

2.1

36.2

61.7

■ Much more likely

■ A little more likely

■ About the same

■ Less likely
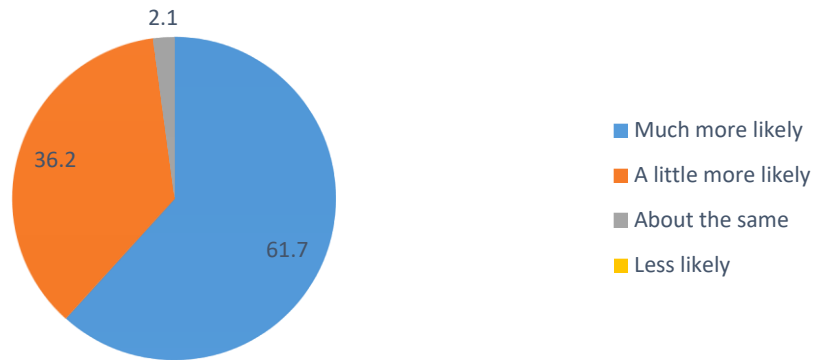
In addition to this, of the 98% of students who said they were more likely to participate in a group discussion, approximately 78% of them said that the class activities had helped a lot in allowing them to feel this way.

Fig. 8. Have Freshman English Activities Helped with Increased Participation Levels?

If you have become more likely to participate in class discussions, how much do you think that the activities in Freshman English have helped you to feel this way?

21.3

78.7

■ They have helped a lot

■ They have helped a little

■ They haven't helped

40

While it is important to acknowledge certain factors which might affect the validity of these findings (among them the potential for participant bias), it is nevertheless possible to venture a number of tentative conclusions from these results. First, students were overwhelmingly positive in their response to the practice discussions. They not only understood the rationale behind the discussions but claimed to see improvements in their own speaking performance over the course of the semester because of them. However, there appeared to be some minor impact on confidence in reaction to the more challenging discussion topics. Therefore, it might be beneficial in the future to treat these discussions more explicitly as fluency exercises with all that implies regarding the discussion content.

Second, the students were likewise very positive about the 5-second rule, with extremely high rates of use being reported. While they were not asked the question specifically, practically no students claimed in their reflection journals that the rule had been instrumental in overcoming their fear of failure. Rather, what many students reported was that the rule was effective in helping them to participate *in spite* of their fear. They were able to use it as a tool to overcome their fear.

Finally, while a significant number of students claimed to have experienced no change in their conscious willingness to make mistakes, a very large majority reported a significantly increased willingness to participate in group discussions, while an even larger majority credited the class activities with helping them in some measure to achieve this. One interesting possibility surrounding this emerged through the three reflection journals, which was not a factor in the original design and implementation of these activities. Many students reported positively on the atmosphere created in the class by the regular acknowledgement and acceptance of mistakes. They said that while much fear remained, they did feel supported by their peers and that the environment was very positive.

CONCLUSION

The class activities reported here were designed with three principles in mind: English as a set of skills able to be improved with practice; practice will create various levels of anxiety and even fear in students, therefore tools for pushing past this fear will be helpful; and finally, practice entails obstacles and the potential for failure. Therefore, how the students conceive of obstacles is vitally important. Feedback from students in response to these activities has been extremely positive and appears to confirm the validity of the principles and the success of their application. Students spoke often of the benefits of their change in mindset, a newfound willingness to participate in class being one of the most important. The positive response from students to these activities suggests a more autonomous approach taking hold that can assist students in what Holec (1981) termed "taking charge of their own learning".

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APPENDIX

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.