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Exploring the Learning Process of Individual Learners in a Student-Centered Activity: A Case of English Presentation Activities at A University in Japan

Article

Exploring the Learning Process of Individual Learners in a Student-Centered Activity: A Case of English Presentation Activities at a University in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze the learning process of university students during English presentation activities. Four students in the course participated in the research. Reflective texts written after each class were analyzed. The result of the correspondence analysis indicated that each participant reflected on themselves from similar or different perspectives. In addition, every single comment was classified into six categories: English, presentation, slide, content, collaborative learning, and active learning. Each comment was also judged whether it contained positive, neutral, or negative emotions. The results were discussed in terms of self-regulated learning based on the participants' individual differences such as their presentation experiences or public speaking anxiety. The main finding was that despite the course offering the same English presentation activities, there were differences in the process or focus of learning among the participants. It suggests that teachers should focus more on individual-optimal learning in a student-centered activity in which students take the initiative in their learning. Self-regulated learning strategies such as how to reflect on oneself are thought to be effective for goal achievement at a higher level.

KEYWORDS: learning process, individual differences, self-regulated learning

Introduction

There is a growing need to conduct student-centered activities that foster students' various ranges of abilities or skills under their autonomy. One such activity is presentation. When giving a presentation, it is effective to use visual aids such as photos, realia, posters, slides, and tablet devices to capture the attention of the audience, deepen their understanding, and make the presentation easier to understand (MEXT, 2018). For example, Shinozaki (2022) administered a presentation activity at a junior high school where the students collaborated on the preparation of a presentation. The preparation included discussing a presentation topic, searching for relevant information, summarizing it, writing a script, creating presentation slides on computers, practicing reading the script aloud, making a presentation, and preparing for the question-and-answer session. Thus, students needed to employ various skills in the preparation phase, the practice phase, and the presentation phase respectively.

This is why learning through presentations provides learners with various outcomes. Lee and Park (2008) report that 92% of the students felt that presentation activities on various topics were interesting and conducive to learning English. Exposure to a variety of topics enables learners to learn about a wide range of vocabulary and expressions along with the contents. In addition to English and content learning, Riadil (2020) clarifies that oral presentations contributed to developing communication strategies. Such strategies are developed during the practice phase. Furthermore, maturity in collaborating with classmates is achieved through the practice of presentation. In this way, an English presentation activity offers learners opportunities to learn more than just English.

However, previous research studies of this kind have looked into students' learning as a whole, and there have not been many practical studies focusing on the process in which each individual learns. As the learning outcomes vary under a student-centered activity, the process to the outcomes or focus of learning could also vary. For example, one learner focuses on learning English itself, and the other focuses on learning contents. These differences might occur due to individual differences, which include affective, cognitive, and personality-related factors (Jonassen & Grabowski, 2012). Tóth (2014) emphasizes the importance of teachers' taking individual differences into account. Therefore, it is important to explore differences in the process or focus of learning based on individual differences.

Research Questions

The present study tries to reveal the differences in the process of learning over a student-centered activity from the analysis of students' reflective comments. The research questions are as follows.

(1) Are there any differences in the overall trend of the content of reflective comments among the students?
(2) Are there any differences in the emotional transition of the contents of their reflective comments among the students?

The discussion will follow based on the students' differences in their English learning history (speaking), presentation experiences, preferences on speaking in public, and speaking anxiety.

Rationale

A presentation activity often proceeds with students' autonomy. Each student is likely to focus on different things, with one learning English by reading an article and another deepening his or her knowledge by summarizing information. Adjusting the ways they learn by themselves is one of the factors that makes this possible. According to Zimmerman (1990), "definitions of students' self-regulated learning involve three features: their use of self-regulated learning strategies, their responsiveness to self-oriented feedback about learning effectiveness, and their interdependent motivational processes" (p.6). Schraw, Kauffman, and Lehman (2006) summarize the components of self-regulated learning based on several theories related to it (Figure 1).
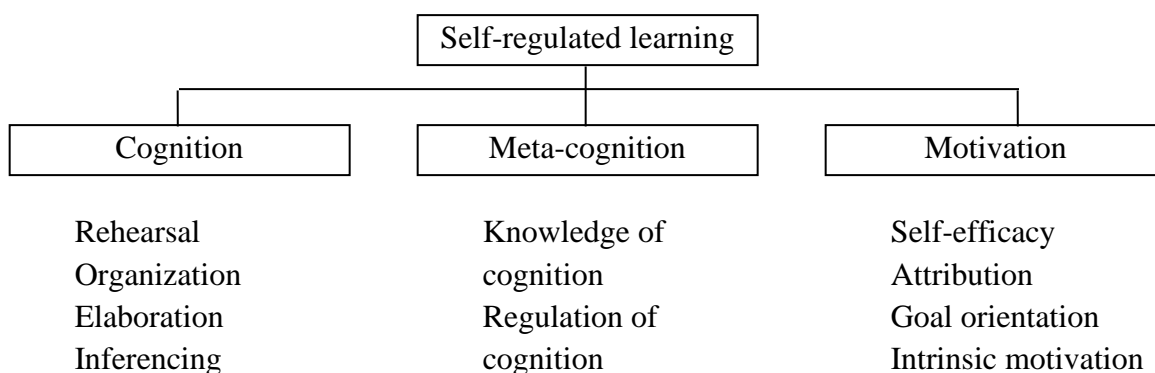
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                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
                    │ Self-regulated learning │
                    └─────────────────────────┘
        ┌─────────────────────┼─────────────────────┐
┌───────────────┐    ┌───────────────┐    ┌───────────────┐
│   Cognition   │    │ Meta-cognition│    │  Motivation   │
└───────────────┘    └───────────────┘    └───────────────┘

  Rehearsal            Knowledge of          Self-efficacy
  Organization         cognition             Attribution
  Elaboration          Regulation of         Goal orientation
  Inferencing          cognition             Intrinsic motivation
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Figure 1: Components of Self-Regulated Learning (Schraw et al., 2006)

They maintain that self-regulated learners have high inferencing skills to analyze what they know and construct what they need to know for the purpose of performing at a higher proficient level. In order for learners to analyze themselves, self-assessment is necessary, which is defined as "a process by which students: 1) monitor and evaluate the quality of their thinking and behavior when learning and 2) identify strategies that improve their understanding and skills" (McMillan & Hearn, 2008, p.40). In this scene, reflection plays an important role in aiding and reinforcing learning (Moon, 1999). It is probable that the method in which the learner reflects on their learning is partially influenced by individual differences. For instance, Akbulut (2010) compares art-based students and science-based students in a design course and clarifies that student learning outcomes were distinct due to their different backgrounds. It might suggest that some individual differences affected the ways they evaluated themselves, thus leading them to different learning processes and outcomes.

That is, students are expected to reflect on what they have done, what they lack, and how they should proceed with their presentation activities so that they can succeed in making a high-quality presentation. Therefore, the present study attempts to clarify the process or focus of individual

students' learning, and the results of this study will allow us to examine the significance of individually-optimal learning.

Method

Instruments

There were two research instruments: a preliminary questionnaire and reflective comments. Before the course started, the authors created a preliminary questionnaire in Japanese to clarify the characteristics of the participants of the present study. Giving a presentation is a mentally high-pressured activity, so some anxiety - an affective factor of individual differences - might arise. Simona (2015) insists that anxiety is induced by speaking in public. Factors of anxiety occurring during a presentation can be classified into two types: internal (e.g., fear of failure, negative experience) and external (e.g., condition of presentation room, failing to practice) (Asnur, 2017). Therefore, the questionnaire included self-evaluation questions to ask about the participants' preferences on speaking in public and speaking anxiety based on the two types. In addition, fact-finding questions were used to ask about the student's English learning history and presentation experiences. The questionnaire was conducted at the beginning of the course. It was also employed for profound analysis with a combination of the reflective comments.

The reflective comments were written in Japanese by the participants after every lesson. The cue "Please write what you thought about or how you felt through today's lesson. (Around 100 words)" was also written in Japanese.

Participants

There were seven students who agreed on the present study, but three of them had several missing values on research materials. There were no missing values for the other four students, and the authors screened their answers to the preliminary questionnaire and the reflective comments, judging that they were suitable as subjects of the present study. Thus, these four students were selected as the participants of the present study, and called Student A, Student B, Student C, and Student D hereafter. They were third-year university students at a national university in Japan, who wanted to be junior high or high school teachers in Japan, and did not major in English. They were taking an English presentation course with 38 other students.

Table 1 summarizes the results of the preliminary questionnaire (See Appendix for the detail).

Table 1: Summary of each Participant's Characteristics

		Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D
English learning history	Since	13 years old	6 years old	14 years old	6 years old
Presentation experiences	Japanese	Many	Many	Some	Some
	English	Some	Many	A few	Some
Speaking in public	Japanese	Good	Fair	Fair	Average
	English	Poor	Poor	Fair	Fair
Public speaking anxiety	Japanese	A little	A little	Very	A little
	English	Very	Very	Very	A little

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Class

The relevant English presentation course began in April and ended in July of 2021. There were 15 classes during the semester (once a week). Each class was 90 minutes long. The objectives were for the students (1) to be able to read and understand an outline of a subject and summarize it in English, (2) to collaborate with others to create and deliver a presentation, and (3) to understand the content of others' presentations and to be able to ask questions and make comments in English. In the first class, the teacher (author) explained the course while including the evaluation criteria. From the second class, students began to work on their presentations. Two classes were allotted for one presentation activity. The length of each presentation was set to be around three minutes. Approximately half of the presentation was about the content of the article and the other half was their own opinions on the topic. The topics of the presentations were all related to education and assigned by the teacher. Due to the prevention measures of COVID-19, the first eight classes were conducted online and the other six classes were face-to-face.

During the online lessons, the main activities were reading an article, writing a script, and creating presentation slides. The students were supposed to work in a group. During the face-to-face lessons, they worked together for presentation preparation but needed to give a presentation individually. An overview of each lesson is as follows (Table 2).

Table 2: An Overview of each Lesson

Online (on-demand) lesson	1	· Understanding the course
	2	· Reading a Japanese article (Topic: English tests) · Summarizing the first two sections of the article in English · Starting to make presentations slides using Google Slide
	3	· Summarizing the third and fourth sections of the article · Working on an opinion writing about the topic · Continuing to make presentation slides · Making comments on partners' slides and manuscripts online
	4	· Transforming a slide with many words into a slide with a simple picture and less words · Changing the font size or color for easier perceptibility · Moving onto the next presentation activity (Topic: STEAM education)
	5	· Continuing the presentation preparation · Oral reading practice using "speaker note" on Google Slide · Making comments on partners' slides and manuscripts on Google Document
	6	· Moving onto the next presentation activity (Topic: English proficiency improvements in some countries)
	7	· Reading an English article
	8	· Posting a presentation video using Flipgrid (Topic: Self-introduction) · Moving onto the next presentation activity (Topic: Class size at junior high schools in Japan)
	9	· Continuing the presentation preparation · Posting a presentation video using Flipgrid · Watching other students' videos

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Face-to-face lesson	10	· Making comments on partners' videos on Flipgrid · Moving onto the next presentation activity (Topic: A class model based on SDGs and STEAM education) (1) Making groups of three or four people (2) Reading a Japanese article (3) Discussing structures of their presentations (4) Dividing up the roles of who was in charge of which section of the article (5) Starting to write the manuscripts on Google Document and make slides on Google Slide
	11	· Practicing giving a presentation within a group · Giving an individual presentation in different small groups a few times
	12	· Moving onto the next presentation activity (Topic: The use of private English tests for unified university exams)
	13	· Preparing and giving a presentation in the same way in Lesson 10 & 11
	14	· Preparing for the final task (Topic: ICT use in education) · Working on the task individually
	15	· Practicing giving a presentation within a group · Giving an individual presentation in different small groups a few times · Posting a presentation video using Flipgrid

Analyses

Correspondence analysis

Text mining was conducted on all the reflective comments that each participant had written after every class except for the fourteenth class for a total of 14 kinds of texts per participant. A qualitative analysis software KH Coder 3.Beta.03i (Higuchi, 2022) was employed to conduct correspondence analysis. Correspondence analysis reveals characteristic words for each external variable. Student A ~ D were set as external variables here. Since the participants wrote the reflective comments in Japanese, the author translated them into English, trying not to impair the original meanings. Before the analysis, common and indistinct words such as the pronouns "I" and "we" were omitted so that only characteristic words would appear on the output result. As a result, the total number of extracted words was 2,966, of which 1,584 were chosen by KH Coder for analysis by automatically excluding common words such as particles and auxiliary verbs. The number of different words was 563, of which 494 were the subjects for analysis. The aggregation unit was selected as H5 (aggregation per Microsoft Excel cell). In order to facilitate the identification of characteristic words, the top 40 significant words were set to appear in the figure.

Categorization

Another qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA (VERBI GmbH, 2021), was utilized so as to scrutinize the contents of each reflective comment and to compare and contrast. In the process of the analysis, each sentence or paragraph in the comments were categorized into six kinds of codes: English, Presentation, Slide, Content, Collaborative learning (CL), and Active learning (AL). Each node was judged whether it contained positive, neutral, or negative emotions. If a text contained both positive and negative sides, it was judged based on its dominance. These were summarized in a table.

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Cells in the table were labeled black for any descriptions of those categories seen in the texts.

Positive comments were labeled gray when a text contained some positive aspect where a participant felt that they learned something new or improved. For example, the comment: "By watching other people's slides and presentations, I learned how to make slides that are easy to read and suitable for presentation, and effective phrases to ask the audience" was regarded as positive and mentioned the perspectives of English, Slide, CL and AL.

Negative comments were labeled dark gray when the texts contained some negative aspect where the participant felt some difficulty while working on or preparing for the presentations. The comment: "Putting the expressions I looked up in my dictionary into slides was not easy. Also, it was difficult for me to convey the information in English in a concise manner" was regarded as negative and mentioned English and Slide.

Neutral comments were labeled light gray. The comment: "As I was reading the article about STEAM education, I found that what was important in programming education was different from what I had expected" was regarded as neutral and mentioned Content.

Results

Correspondence analysis

The result of the correspondence analysis is illustrated in Figure 2.
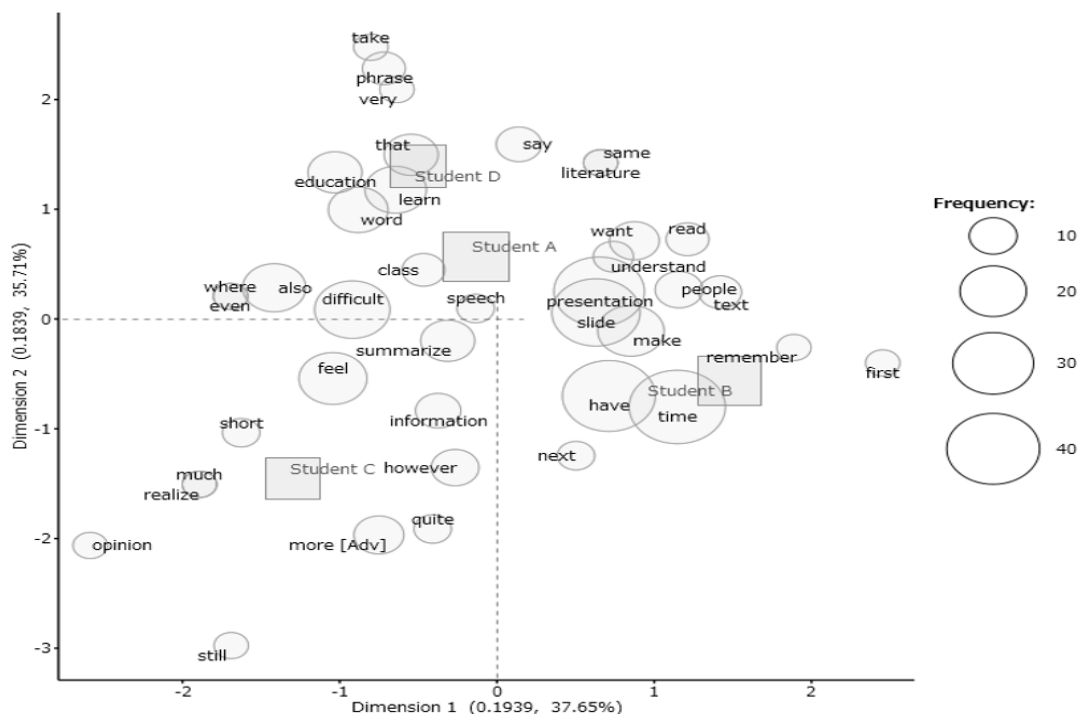
Note. □ = values of external variables (Student A ~ D)

Figure 2: Result of Correspondence Analysis

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The squares indicate the external variables, and the size of the frequency circle in the figure indicates the number of times the word appears. The farther a word is from the center, the more characterized it is judged. For instance, Student A and Student D were plotted in the same direction, indicating that they used the words such as "word" or "phrase" more frequently than Student B and Student C. Student B was plotted far from the others, and used the words such as "remember" or "first" often. Student C was also plotted far from the others, and used the words such as "opinion" or "realize". Examples of each participant's comments are shown in Table 3. Examples of each participant's comments are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Examples of Student A~D's Comments

Student A	The ability to rephrase difficult *word*s into simple ones is a very useful skill not only in English but also in Japanese, so I would like to take this opportunity to train it .
Student B	I tried to *remember* what I had thought of saying beforehand, but if I couldn't think of anything, I felt that it was one way to practice so that I could immediately come up with alternative expressions.
Student C	I think my presentation was less boring than last time. However, I realized after I was pointed out that my personal *opinion* did not lead to a sufficient solution and that it was difficult to convey my intentions, so I will try to devise a way to convey my intentions more easily next time.
Student D	I only wrote down *phrase*s and words , so it took me a while to think of what I was going to say , but after a few times of practice , I was able to think of what I was going to say next while speaking English . There were some *phrase*s and words that were not easily recognized , so I thought I should practice pronunciation .

Note. Each italicized word was regarded as being characteristic according to Figure 2.

As to the research question (1): Are there any differences in the overall trend of the content of reflective comments among the students? it can be said that there are similarities between Student A and Student D, but they wrote their comments by using different words from those of Student B and Student C.

Categorization

The correspondence analysis revealed some similarities and differences from the use of words in their reflective comments. However, they might have monitored themselves in different perspectives with different emotions. Table 4 summarizes the categorization of each participant's reflective comments. The numbers in the upper row display the fifteen classes conducted in the course, where reflective comments were required with the exception of the fourteenth class.

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Table 4: Categories of each Participant's Reflective Comments

Student A	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
English		■	■	■			■	■			■	■		-	■
Presentation	■	■		■				■	■			■	■	-	■
Slide	■		■	■	■						■		■	-	■
Content			■			■								-	
CL										■	■		■	-	
AL											■			-	■
Positive	▒		▒					▒		▒	▒	▒	▒	-	▒
Neutral		░		░	░	░			░					-	
Negative		▓	▓	▓	▓		▓		▓	▓				-	

Student B	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
English		■				■		■	■			■		-	■
Presentation	■			■			■		■		■	■	■	-	
Slide		■	■	■	■					■			■	-	
Content														-	
CL			■			■				■				-	
AL								■			■			-	
Positive			▒		▒		▒			▒	▒	▒	▒	-	▒
Neutral		░	░		░	░			░			░		-	
Negative	▓			▓	▓				▓		▓		▓	-	

Student C	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
English	■	■		■		■	■			■		■	■	-	■
Presentation								■	■		■		■	-	
Slide			■	■										-	
Content					■									-	■
CL			■							■				-	
AL							■							-	■
Positive			▒				▒					▒		-	▒
Neutral	░			░	░		░		░		░			-	
Negative		▓			▓				▓	▓				-	

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Student D	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
English	■	■	■		■	■	■			■			■	-	■
Presentation			■					■			■		■	-	
Slide		■											■	-	
Content				■		■			■		■	■		-	■
CL											■			-	
AL			■		■		■							-	
Positive		■					■				■		■	-	■
Neutral	■		■	■	■	■					■	■		-	
Negative		■			■		■		■	■			■	-	

Note. ■ = mentioned in the texts, ■ = positive comments, ■ = neutral comments, ■ = negative comments.

Figure 3 compares the emotional transitions of each participant based on their texts. The numbers and the colors mean the same as the ones in Table 4.
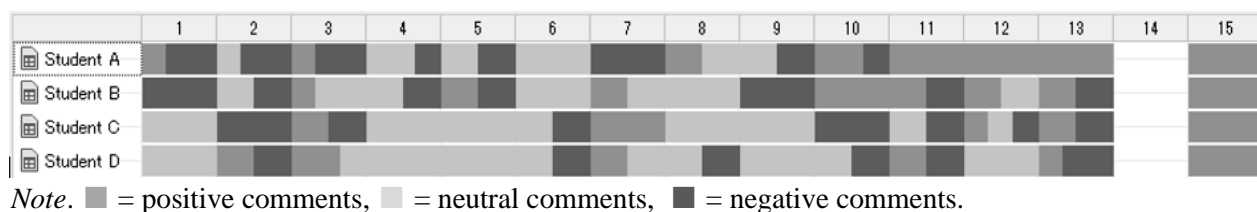

Note. ■ = positive comments, ■ = neutral comments, ■ = negative comments.

Figure 3: Comparison of the Emotional Transitions of each Participant

At the beginning of the course, the students had neutral or negative feelings. They worried about speaking English or making presentations. Subsequently, there seemed to be several differences between the students in how they spent their time in class and how they felt. For instance, Student A started off the first half of the course with negative comments, but in the second half, a significant increase in positive comments could be seen. Student B did not mention anything about the contents of the articles. Positive, neutral, and negative comments respectively appeared sparsely over the whole course. Student C reflected on English use most of the time regardless of the positiveness. Student D also reflected on English use frequently, but descriptions showed learning from contents of articles. At the end of the course, all four students had positive feelings about their learning outcomes.

According to the result of the correspondence analysis, Student A and Student D shared the same words. However, the categorization of the reflective comments discovered that Student A tended to write negative comments in the first half, but more positive comments in the second half, while Student D was more negative overall.

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As to the research question (2): Are there any differences in the emotional transition of the contents of their reflective comments among the students? there was a similar trend at the beginning and the end of the course, but each student reflected on themselves in different perspectives and the process of their emotional transitions were diverse.

Discussion

The results indicate that there were some differences in the process of learning among the participants, although they shared a similar trend at the beginning and the end of the course. Various individual differences in presentation experience or public speaking anxiety might affect how self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 1990) works. This section discusses it in terms of self-regulated learning summarized by Schraw et al., (2006).

Student A was not good at speaking English in public. Negative comments continued for a while after the start of the class, suggesting that Student A might not have had a sufficient sense of self-efficacy. The positive comments increased after the face-to-face class started, suggesting that his or her motivation for learning English and giving presentations increased through cooperative learning with others.

Student B started learning English at the age of 6 and has had a lot of experience giving presentations, but Student B is not comfortable speaking English in front of others. Student B had many concerns about learning English and preparing for presentations, and there was a certain amount of negative commentary immediately after the class began. Throughout the course, Student B monitored and self-evaluated his or her sufficient or insufficient performance, which may have led to the sparse expressions of positive, negative, and neutral feelings. Additionally, the absence of content descriptions suggested that his or her thoughts on topics provided were less likely to be prompted than learning English or learning to give a presentation.

Student C was not good at public speaking, regardless of language, and had less experience with presentations than the other students. Since Student C was anxious about public speaking even in Japanese, it was likely that Student C would be even more uncomfortable speaking in English. Perhaps because Student C was the youngest of the four students to begin practicing English, many of his or her reflections were related to English. During the face-to-face classes when the students were supposed to speak English to others, Student C reflected, "I think I was able to say my presentation less boringly than the last time. However, I noticed that my personal opinion did not lead to a sufficient solution and it was difficult to convey my intention". This shows that Student C was aware of his or her accomplishments and weak points by self-regulation.

Student D started practicing English speaking at the age of 6 and had some experience in giving presentations, so Student D was relatively optimistic about public speaking regardless of language. In many of the English presentation activities, Student D frequently pondered over the contents of the topics. For example, after reading an English article "Class size at junior high schools in Japan", Student D stated, "I myself am in favor of gradually moving to smaller class sizes because of the

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Corona pandemic. With 40 students in a class, it is very difficult to monitor each student's progress". It can be inferred that learning went beyond English learning.

Conclusion

Implications

This study tried clarifying the process or focus of individual students' learning during English presentation activities as an example of a student-centred activity. It showed some differences among the participants who were taking the same course and working on the same activities. As the preliminary questionnaire showed, each participant had different situations, and it seemed that they monitored themselves in their own way and adjusted what to learn based on said situations. Students try to pursue the course objectives, but teachers should monitor students' learning process and focus more so that students can achieve the objectives at a higher level. Specific examples would be to teach them self-regulated learning strategies including how to reflect on themselves, or to conduct occasional formative assessments with feedback from the teachers or peers, along with teachers' support for students to set their own goals.

Limitations

First, this study examined how students self-regulated and learned toward their objectives in a class under general plenary instructions. Therefore, it was not possible to compare classes that remained in general instructions with classes that provided instructions to individual students. In addition, since data were obtained from only four students, further data will need to be collected and analyzed for generalization of the findings of this study.

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Appendix

Lists of Questions in the Preliminary Questionnaire

Q	Items		A	B	C	D
1.	At what age did you start learning English (speaking)? ( ) years old		13	6	14	6
2.	Are you good at speaking in front of multiple people? 1. Yes 2. Rather Yes 3. Rather No 4. No	J	1	2	2	3
		E	4	3	3	3
3.	Do you like to speak in front of more than one person? 1. Yes 2. Rather Yes 3. Rather No 4. No	J	1	2	2	2
		E	3	3	2	2
4.	When you were in elementary school, did you have opportunities to speak in front of more than one person? 1. Yes, several times a year 2. Yes, a few times a year 3. Never	J	1	1	1	2
		E	3	1	3	2
5.	When you were a junior high school student, did you have an opportunity to speak in front of more than one person? 1. Yes, several times a year 2. Yes, a few times a year 3. Never	J	1	1	2	2
		E	2	1	3	1
6.	When you were in high school, did you have an opportunity to speak in front of more than one person? 1. Yes, several times a year 2. Yes, a few times a year 3. Never	J	1	1	2	2
		E	1	1	2	1
7.	Have you had an opportunity to speak in front of more than one person since you became a university student? 1. Yes, several times a year 2. Yes, a few times a year 3. Never	J	1	1	1	1
		E	3	2	2	2
8.	Do you currently feel nervous when speaking in front of more than one person? 1. Yes, I really do 2. Yes, a little 3. Not really 4. Not at all	J	2	1	1	2
		E	1	1	1	2
9.	Are you good at giving a few minute speeches where you are given time to prepare? 1. Yes 2. Rather Yes 3. Rather No 4. No	J	2	3	3	2
		E	3	4	3	2
10.	Are you good at giving a few minute speeches that give you little preparation time? 1. Yes 2. Rather Yes 3. Rather No 4. No	J	2	3	3	3
		E	4	4	3	4
11.	Are you good at giving a few minute presentation where you are given time to prepare? 1. Yes 2. Rather Yes 3. Rather No 4. No	J	2	2	2	2
		E	3	3	2	2
12.	Are you good at question and answer sessions with no preparation time? 1. Yes 2. Rather Yes 3. Rather No 4. No	J	2	3	3	3
		E	4	4	3	4

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		A	B	C	D
13.	What causes you to feel nervous when you speak in front of several people? Please select all that apply to you in particular.	5	1	5	3
		6	2	6	6
	1. Lack of preparation of presentation materials, etc.	9	3	9	10
	2. Lack of practice in presentation (speaking)	10	6	12	11
	3. Lack of practice in answering questions (J)		9	13	12
	4. Difficulty in speaking content		10		
	5. Anxiety about whether or not the message will be conveyed				
	6. Appropriate use of language				
	7. Lack of voice				
	8. Looking people in the eye (eye contact)	4	1	2	1
	9. Size of the audience	5	2	5	2
	10. Type of audience (who is in the audience)	9	3	6	3
	11. Evaluation (e.g., as it relates to grades and selection)	10	4	10	4
	12. Lack of vocabulary (E)	12	5	11	9
	13. Lack of grammatical skills	13	6	12	11
	14. Inaccurate pronunciation		9	13	12
	15. Lack of fluency		10		13
	16. Other				

Note. The questions except for Q1 asked about both native language (Japanese) and English.
Note. A ~ D = Student A ~ D, J = Japanese, E = English.
Note. The questions were translated from Japanese into English by the authors.