

Time Zones: A Class Management Tool for Required English Classes

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Abstract

2019年から、獨協大学では授業時間を従来の90分から100分に延長するという新たな教育方針を採用した。一見すると1授業毎に追加された10分間は大したことはない時間のようだが、日々の累積により、学生が学習と課外活動のバランスを保つことに負担を感じ、学習意欲にマイナスの影響を与えるおそれがある。一日に3~5コマの100分授業に参加し、学生が各授業で高いレベルのやる気を維持することは、学習意欲の高い層の学生達にとっても課題である。その結果、教師には効率的に授業を計画し、提供し、運営することがさらに求められている。またこれは、特に必修の英語授業を英文専攻の学生以外に対して行う教師に関係している話題である。この場合、学生の多くは英語は現在または卒業後も自分の生活には関係がないものと見なしており、英語学習への意欲が低だけでなく、やる気をなくす傾向がある。結論として、授業時間の延長は実際には学生の学習量の低下につながるといえる。そこで教師による効果的な授業運営が、100分授業において生徒の集中力を継続させるためにより重要なものとなってくる。シンプルで実用的な教育ツール「タイムゾーン」は、学習意欲の低い学生への対策であり、また教師と学生間の相互協力を促進することをめざすものである。

Introduction

At a conference for teacher professional development in Tokyo, researcher, Curtis Kelly, gave a presentation on how he perceived Japanese students learn English through his experiences at Japanese high schools and universities. His opening remarks highlighted three definite learning styles: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (Kelly, 2009). The following discussion of his thesis suggested that a teacher who could master all three would be rewarded with a class of L2 learners mostly focused and involved for the entire lesson. He then went on to produce a photograph for the audience to see of a group of students totally engrossed in his lesson. Yes, he had empirical evidence. He then showed another photograph of the same group taken a few seconds later, but at a slightly different angle. This time it included a student with her leg up

on the desk plucking an errant hair out of her shin. Kelly (2009) summed up his presentation by intimating that no matter how prepared you are as a teacher, how engaging your lesson plan is, how perfect the learning environment you have provided; students may prioritize something as insignificant as a leg hair over the learning task you have set. Simply put, he reinforced the notion that if external distractions can disrupt students in a seemingly well-motivated class, the teacher will face greater challenges in how to deal with distractions in a class low on motivation to learn English.

Working with Demotivation

A challenging class for many teachers can be a required English class for lower-level, non-English majors. The challenge is to maintain a certain level of motivation among the students to ensure the classwork gets completed to satisfy course requirements. In a brief and most basic description of theories that apply to L2 learners, motivation can be categorized as either intrinsic where students have a personal reason for learning the language and find motivation from within, or extrinsic where external factors fuel a desire to use the language (Dörnyei, 2001). For the teacher of lower-level, non-English majors, there is an added burden of dealing with demotivating factors dissuading students from engaging in the lesson. Of the numerous external factors that can contribute to students losing motivation for learning English, commonly cited are: textbook choices, teacher competence and attitude, or boredom with the class activities (Al Kaboody, 2003). Most prominent, however, is the fact that English can be viewed as a waste of time, as the student does not see a place where English will play a role in their lives after graduation (Ushioda 2013, p. 9).

To confront demotivation among L2 learners requires a leaning towards extrinsic motivating orientations, offering rewards for completing tasks or punishments for not completing tasks in order for them to ultimately get credit for the course (Noels, 2001). Essentially, it means letter grades for assignments and scores for test performances can act as drivers of motivation. The purpose being that a higher grade may instill greater confidence in some students and encourage greater effort on tasks and more regular class attendance (Brookhart 2013, p.37). Conversely, issuing a lower grade delivers a warning that the student needs to work harder to buckle down and change their behavior (Schwartz, 2011) and in some cases avoid repeating the class next year.

Actual class-time participation is a separate consideration when it comes to motivation. Even though the students are informed that a percentage of their final grade is made up by how they perform in class, there can still be a prevailing mindset that just “warming a seat” with little participation is enough to score highly in class performance with some students in required classes. As Noels (2001) suggests, a blasé attitude to class performance can stem from the fact that students do not value class activities above personal priorities, irrespective of whether they were created especially for them by the teacher or prescribed by a textbook. They would rather surreptitiously chat with their classmates, play games on their smartphones, complete homework for another class, or put their heads down on their desks and sleep through the lesson, a common phenomenon, which teachers have to deal with in Japanese universities (Mihara 2018, p. 79). A pragmatic approach to classroom management needs to be adopted before these kinds of behaviors creep into the lessons and throw up greater challenges for the teacher.

A Tool for Classroom Management

One suggested classroom management strategy which aims to counterbalance pervasive demotivating factors influencing the behavior of non-English majors, is to implement Time Zones for class activities (Lange, 2012). A common approach for teachers is to prepare most activities in ten, fifteen, or twenty-minute chunks for a ninety- to one-hundred-minute class, which usually involve a different learning skill. For instance, with a listening activity, warm-up questions may precede a listening task (5-10 minutes), which may be followed by comprehension questions (15 minutes) and a group discussion (10-15 minutes). For each activity, there will be some type of teacher set up, student production (individual or pairs or groups), followed by teacher/student feedback and appraisal (Nunan, 2004). The concept of Time Zones is not so much to do with the actual timing of activities, but to break up each activity into zones or phases (Lange, 2012).

The three specific phases or zones are: *My Time* (setup and feedback), *Our Time* (student production), and *Your Time* (short break to refocus). Each sets out precisely what is expected of the students and defines whether the teacher or students take a dominant role. If we were to use the same listening activity as an example for implementing Time Zones, it would start with *My Time*. The teacher begins by explaining to the students that they need to ask a partner the warm-up questions. The teacher then announces it is *Our Time*, which is the actual time the

students work through the warm-up questions. After ten minutes or the amount of time the teacher has allocated, the teacher announces it is *My Time* again.

In *My Time*, the teacher may wish to call on a few students to give their responses to the warm-up questions. Following this, the teacher explains what is required for the next task, the listening component and how the students should answer the comprehension questions. The students transition again in to *Our Time* for around fifteen minutes as they complete the listening task. Once the teacher is satisfied the class has completed the task, they call them back into *My Time* where the teacher would possibly ask the students to help each other with the answers before giving the correct answers to the comprehension questions.

For the final task in this activity, the teacher divides the class into small groups and explains the objective and desired outcome of the discussion and sets a finish time. The call of *Our Time* is to let the students know to start and to get the job done. After monitoring the groups and determining they have completed the task, the final call for the activity is *Your Time*. For a few minutes, the students can chat with their classmates, check their smartphones or put their heads down on their desks for a short respite with the teacher's blessing. When the teacher has decided it is time to start the next activity, they will call out it is *My Time* and work through the time zones again.

Most teachers are probably delivering their lessons in a similar manner, but without attaching a label to each component of the activity or including a brief rest period at the end. Labelling may seem redundant, however it allows students to identify immediately in an almost Pavlovian-conditioning sense when to listen, work or relax.

My Time

My Time, as it would sound announced by the teacher; is the teacher's time (Lange, 2012). When the teacher calls out *My Time*, it is a signal for students to turn their attention to the teacher. Obviously, this is nothing new. In almost all teaching situations, as soon as the teacher raises his or her voice the students know it is time to "listen up," and act accordingly. However, in some classes it does not necessarily mean "everyone" to all students. Waiting for a pair to stop speaking off topic or a student staring downwards at the smartphone so secretly positioned in their lap that the teacher knows exactly what they are doing, is not only frustrating to the teacher, but also to the students who just want to get on with the lesson. The teacher may call

on the individual students to pay attention, which can create an awkward or embarrassing moment in the lesson (Norris, 2001). Alternatively, the teacher may adopt a laissez-faire approach and just ignore them so they can concentrate on the students showing an interest in the lesson moving forward. However, not addressing the problem can tend to have a compounding effect where other students may feel the teacher does not care whether they listen or not, and fewer students may pay attention.

By announcing it is *My Time* the students understand the purpose of the call and exactly what is expected of everyone in the class (Lange, 2012). The teacher may need to repeat it is *My Time* a few times until it is echoed around the class. Relying on peer pressure, especially from the influential students in the class, can help call others into line to pay attention (Sakui 2007, p. 51). The reason for the self-regulating behavior of the students is that they recognize all three phases in Time Zones are interconnected (Lange, 2012). In other words, they understand they cannot move on to the next phase without knowing what needs to be done.

Our Time

Most of the class time will be taken up in *Our Time*. This is when the students essentially get to work (Lange, 2012). They should understand the objective of the activity, the parameters of what has to be done and the expected output, be it reading a short article and answering the comprehension questions or using target language to discuss a topic or listening to a short lecture and identifying the main points. The teacher can allocate a timeframe for the classwork to be done or determine a number of repetitions. There are no excuses for any student not to participate, and it is the teacher's task to monitor output and offer assistance when clarification is needed. It is especially important to offer praise for good work or a good work ethic for lower-level students to let them know they are meeting expectations (Matsumoto, 1989, p.174). Of course, there will be students who will be distracted by other classmates or who do not find the activity particularly stimulating. They will need more encouragement from the teacher and/or their classmates.

Our Time is driven by a notion of shared objectives. The teacher wants the students to engage with the day's lesson plan and for them to demonstrate they have completed the target task and acquired the target language. Similarly, the students need to complete the lesson and will also want to demonstrate their understanding through practical application of the assigned

learning task. Once the activity is completed, both teacher and student can assess their performances and offer mutual feedback before moving on to the next activity (Lange, 2012). You should expect there will be students who are only motivated by the thought of ticking off another class in a long semester. Your consolation as a teacher is that at least they will have completed the required classwork. They may not have acquired deeper understanding and knowledge, but they will have achieved their goal of gaining credit for the course.

Additionally, in a class of twenty-plus students, irrespective of whether the classes are streamed by a placement test or an external scoring apparatus such as TOEIC or not, there will be varying levels of ability. In general, the more capable students will complete certain activities much faster than others. Instead of impatiently waiting while others finish and distracting their neighbors from staying on task, in *Our Time* the onus is on them to assist their partners or other group members to complete the activity. Then as a pair or group they can take up their reward of *Your Time*.

Your Time

This is a short respite of a few minutes from the classwork for students to refresh and attend to the usual distractions that would affect the flow of a lesson (Lange, 2012). Students are free to use this time any way they wish, within reason. It is a chance to talk off topic with classmates uninterrupted by the teacher calling them into line. Most students will immediately reach for their smartphones and check their SNS accounts. Smartphones are arguably the biggest distraction to students in higher education. Once a smartphone pings to signal they have a message, the student's concentration is dragged from the textbook to their bag or pocket. Somehow, during the lesson, they will discreetly check the message, which is usually something innocuous and redundant as a friend checking in.

A prohibition on smartphones in the classroom is not necessarily effective in all classroom settings. Some students will risk their teacher's disapproval to access their phones. In a study carried out by Binti Awaludin and Binti Shuhaimi (2018, p.101) on English language students in a public university in Perak, Malaysia, almost half of the survey sample admitted to using their smartphones for social use one to three times during a 120-minute class. As a qualifier to their study, the researchers deemed that the students may have under-reported their smartphone use in class, as not to upset their teachers (2018, p.102). Whether students

access their smartphones just once or up to five times during a lesson, the effort accorded to avoid being detected by the teacher is a waste of time and energy.

Furthermore, a Melbourne University study of three hundred office workers showed that seventy percent of those who used the Internet for personal reasons in the workplace delivered a nine percent net increase in productivity. Also, they demonstrated sharper levels of concentration when given work tasks (Fahmy, 2009). It is assumed that by taking short breathers, the brain will be refreshed and renewed (Fahmy, 2009). Granted, the objective of the work environment is to maximize productivity while the classroom is a place of learning, however, the distractions offered by smartphones are the same.

A pragmatic approach to smartphone use in the classroom, managed properly, can help with student output. By apportioning a small amount of class time for students low on motivation to check their smartphones can clear their heads to concentrate on the next class activity.

Conclusion

Essentially, Time Zones is a class management tool aimed at lower-level, non-English majors enrolled in required ESL classes. However, it can be applied to any level of class in which students have to learn English, but would prefer not to do so. It is prescribed as a simple and practical approach to temper demotivation, as it clearly breaks down each class activity into phases of when to listen and when to work with the reward of short breaks to refresh. Not only does Times Zones aim to stimulate student motivation in order to generate constant student output, it also works to promote mutual trust and respect between teacher and students for improved student engagement (Alison & Halliwell 2002). If you were to adopt Time Zones as a class management tool, it should be explained to the students during the course orientation stage in the first class of the semester.

Limitations

As with any class management tool for lower-level ESL classes where student motivation is a concern, Times Zones can be challenged by students who are unwilling to work within its parameters. Thus, the concept of Time Zones may appear to be an over-optimistic approach to addressing the gulf between the learning goals of the class and learner output. Its effectiveness can be questioned for expecting demotivated students to react positively to something new just because the teacher has asked them to do so.

There are pitfalls that need to be considered when implementing Times Zones.

- a. In *My Time*, some students will simply refuse to pay attention to the teacher's instructions no matter how much peer pressure is applied. If too many do not understand how to approach the activity, it is no use proceeding on to the other phases.
- b. In *Our Time*, students may rush through the tasks or copy or cheat from others without gaining any deeper understanding from the activity. These "free riders" who do not participate in class activities will make the class less effective (Kato, Bolstad & Watari 2015, p. 23). Their only objective is to move on to *Your Time*, which is a brief respite from their English class.
- c. The few minutes to recharge and reset for the next activity in *Your Time* can actually become a distraction. They may try to stretch the break time for much longer than allocated.
- d. If the class dynamic is poor, where cliques of students do not mix well in group activities, Time Zones would actually cause more dysfunction in the class. Peer pressure would have a negative effort on student output.

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