
Students' Perception of Progress: Are Grades, Peers, and 'Successful use of the Language' Indicators?

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In order to learn a second language, learners have to go through the natural process of learning: from beginner to intermediate, and finally to advanced, with various intermittent stages. Although this process is indisputable, how students think they are progressing through that process remains a mystery. Assumptions may be made that students rely on grades, feedback, or comparing themselves to others, however, they are only assumptions. This paper is going to explore this profound mystery of how students determine they are doing in the language learning process which will be labelled 'sense of progress'. When discussing learner-centered classrooms, self-directed learners and autonomous learning, sense of progress is important to consider because if learners are self-directed in their learning they must be developing a sense of progress to determine where they are in their studies, the same can be said for autonomous learners. Moreover, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses are often required for students with limited English proficiency to be allowed to enter into full-time studies at an English-speaking university; these students then may draw on grades as an indicator of their progress. Moreover, if the students feel pressure to achieve a certain level, they might compare themselves to other students in the class, both grades and comparison to peers will be taken into consideration for this study. Therefore, in this paper I will explore this mystery of 'sense of progress' for students in an EAP course.

Background

To begin with, I will look at related research that investigates the effect of grades on students' perceptions in various learning environments. Pomerantz and Saxon (2001) looked at elementary children's academic and social competence. They found that grades and acceptance by their peers were indicators of performance; however, grades were seen as more stable. Hynd, Holschuh and Nist (2000) examined two studies for students' perceptions of their desire to learn science. All the students they interviewed mentioned that grades affected their motivation: some students expressed that low grades were motivating, while other expressed the opposite, and the same can be said for high grades. Hynd et al. remark that "grades seemed to be internalized as measures of self-worth" (p. 55). If that is the case, it is logical

to think that a student's self-worth affects their sense of progress, therefore it grades might have a strong affect on a student's sense of progress. Nonetheless, there does not seem to be any research on this association.

The ideology behind self-assessment, a form of alternative assessment, is based on the foundation that if learners are trained to self-assess they will only become better learners, but they will also become more autonomous learners. Peirce, Swain, and Hart (1993), as part of their study, investigated whether benchmarks, a peer and a specific task, as a comparison made a difference in the correlations of self-assessment and tested proficiency of grade 8 French immersion students. They found that both benchmarks made a difference in the correlation: when the benchmark was the peer, the students perceived themselves as more proficient in receptive skills (listening and reading) than productive skills (speaking and writing). Although Peirce et. al. found that peers as a benchmark lead students to perceiving themselves as more proficient in certain skills, it still remains uncertain if students use peers as a benchmark informally or on a daily basis.

In a study that relates autonomy and self-assessment, Rivers (2001) looked at eleven experienced language learners and their development of progress. The learners seemed to assess their progress, but also their learning styles, preference for certain strategies, and conflicts with teaching styles and other learner's behaviors. Rivers found that the majority of the learners interviewed displayed self-directed learning behaviors to change their learning environment, thus demonstrating highly autonomous learning. Even though students displayed highly autonomous learning part of which included personally assessing their own language ability, they were extremely experienced language learners, and therefore, the results are difficult to generalize to any other language learners.

Williams and Burden (1999) look directly at how students who are learning French perceive their successes or failures. They interviewed twelve students that were 10 to 15 years old. The results show that the students tended to judge their progress on various factors, one of which was grades. Although Williams and Burden findings are interesting, more research needs to be done to see how university students determine their sense of progress.

Peer assessment is a common and popular form of alternate or formative assessment that is used in a variety of language learning contexts (Saito and Fujita, 2004; Cheng and Warren, 2005). According to Topping (1998), peer assessment is when "individuals consider the amount, level, value, worth, quality, or success of the products or outcomes of learning of peers of similar status" (p. 250). Numerous studies have examined the usefulness of peer assessment: Cheng and Warren investigate the attitudes of students in regards to assessing peers' language proficiency; they also compare assessments done by teachers and peers. The results show that the students were tentative about their capability to assess another student's language proficiency when compared with other aspects of performance. Moreover, Cheng and Warren noticed that the students had the tendency to

evaluate their peers on fewer criteria than the teacher. Though students may assess other students within a narrower framework than their teacher, which could be perceived as a negative aspect of peer assessment, there have been numerous studies that support peer assessment as a practical and functional form of alternative assessment. For example, it can encourage active learning and teamwork (Riley, 1995, as cited in Topping), and may provide the students more insight into the assessment processes (Fry, 1990, as cited in Topping). Nevertheless, to date there have been no studies conducted that explore whether students assess their peers as a form of comparison for an indicator of their own sense of progress.

In this paper, I address three research questions: (1) what indicators of progress emerge from the interview data, (2) do students compare themselves to other students as an indicator of progress, (3) are grades an indicator of progress (4) and what is the relationship or interaction between sense of progress and grades.

Methodology

I approached this project from a socio-constructivist position. In a constructivist position, knowledge is characteristic of the perspective (Schwandt, 2000); therefore, I believe it is important to explore and negotiate the meaning through interviews, which offer, in my opinion, the most promising opportunity to better understand a learner's beliefs, assumptions and experience. Since it was important for me to explore in depth what students use as indicators of progress or believe they use as indicators, it is crucial to present in this paper as much of the context as possible to ensure that the findings are representative of the students' perspective, as well as of my own as the researcher. To create triangulation in the study, I implemented, in addition to interviews, observations, and questionnaires. I also conducted two interviews with the class instructor to create more perspectives on the study.

Observations

Even though the focus of the study was on interviews, I believe that it was also important to gain multiple perspectives through observations and a questionnaire. I felt that the observations were important to get a sense of what the classroom environment was like.

I observed the EAP class a total of five times. The first EAP class that I observed was the students' midterm exam, and as a result, I was not formally introduced to the class. Following a one week break, I was introduced to the class by the instructor. Although it was unintentional, I believe that it was beneficial being introduced on the second time I went into the classroom because the students were already accustomed to me, and I think this resulted in positive response when I requested for volunteers to participate in the project. After I was introduced to the class, I told the class about my project, during which I asked for participants to interview by distributing consent forms to all the students and indicating that if they

wanted to participate they should sign and date the form and put it in the instructor's mailbox. While explaining what I would be doing during my observations, I indicated that the students should not be nervous about my presence since I was simply there to get a general understanding of the class. I made the point that if they saw me writing something down it would probably be what the instructor had written on the board. I felt that this was important especially when they were doing something that would be evaluated. For example, the students gave a presentation during which I did not take notes. I only wrote down the titles of the presentations, which were related to the topics that the students had for other assignments. The reason it was important for me that the students understood I was not there to evaluate them, thereby, remaining approachable and non-threatening, so that when I observed the classes I influenced the atmosphere as little as possible. More importantly, I think that this was essential for when I interviewed the participants because I hoped that they would feel comfortable with me and consequently speak as freely as possible.

Questionnaire

Questionnaires (Appendix B) were distributed to two classes: the EAP course and the non-credit intensive ESL course. When I introduced the questionnaire to the students, I emphasized that the questionnaire was anonymous. To ensure anonymity and that there was no pressure to complete the questionnaire, I made a box with a slot, similar to a voting box, and said to the students that if they did not want to fill in the questionnaire, they still had to fold up the piece of paper and put it in the box, so that it would look like everyone filled out the questionnaire, thus alleviating the pressure to complete the questionnaire. Moreover, while the participants were filling out the questionnaires, the instructor and I left the room to make sure that there was no pressure on the students to fill out the questionnaire. The three students interviewed from the EAP course were given the questionnaire as part of the second set of interviews, and therefore were not administered anonymously. Moreover, for the students that I interviewed, I asked them to rate their answers since it was obvious that the first student interviewed had trouble choosing a best answer. They were asked to rate questions 4, 5, 12 and 14.

Interviews

In this study, I focused primarily on interviews because I believe the students' concepts are socially constructed, as seen in Leki and Carson's (1997) study. Similar to Leki and Carson, I also view that the interviews are a means to negotiate meaning and mutual understanding between the interviewer and interviewee. In order to get a better understanding of who the student are as people and as second language learners, I felt it was necessary to do two rounds of interviews. In the first round of interviews, I asked the students a set of predetermined questions (Appendix A). Although

the questions were predetermined, I felt that it was important to let the first interview take its own course, especially with the student interviews, so that I could get a good grasp of who the students were at that particular point of time. The first round of interviews are what Leki and Carson would describe as non-standardized interviews. I perceived the first interview as an opportunity to understand the student's background, goals for learning English, and their experiences with the Canadian academic environment. I felt that by gaining a good understanding of who the participant was I would be better equipped to interpret the participants' responses in the interviews and on the questionnaires.

With the second round of interviews, I had the students complete the questionnaire that was given in class. After the students were finished the questionnaire, I turned on the audio recorder and asked the participants to explain their answers and provide examples if possible.

There were also two interviews with the instructor. Both interviews had predetermined questions, as seen in Appendix A. The first interview was to better understand the course and what the instructor thought of the students' progress. The second interview was to discuss whether the students had made any progress and to gain even more depth on the course. Although, the instructor was a participant in the research project, she is not described in the participants section since the focus of this study was on the students.

Three students who had volunteered to participate in the research project signed consent forms indicating that they understood what the project was about, and gave me to discuss their progress and grades with their instructor. I digitally recorded the interviews, and then transcribed the interviews in full. There were eight interviews in total. The students' interviews ranged from 30 to 50 minutes and the instructor's first and second interview were 45 and 12 minutes, respectively. During this process, I would transcribe five minutes and then go back over the same segment to verify my transcription. After I had transcribed all the interviews, I coded them using color tabs. The coding system is as follows: orange: indicator of progress; blue: goals; yellow: comparing to other students; green: talking about grades; and pink: talking about differences in pedagogy. Once the transcriptions were coded, I looked for patterns and connections in the first and second interview of each participant, and subsequently among all three participants.

The Course

The participants were from English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at a Canadian University, which is designed to promote the "development of research and analytic skills, primarily through reading and writing of academically-oriented texts", as stated in the University's Undergraduate Calendar¹. It is the highest course level in the EAP stream. The course syllabus states, "by the end of the course, students should be able to

¹ The full reference is not included to protect the students' identity

communicate appropriately within the academic context”. The course is a student-as-ethnographer approach to their own disciplines, which is seen in Currie (1999). There are three main assignments: A need assessment project, an academic research project, and an academic language in use project. If the students receive a B- or higher in the course, they move on to becoming a full-time student.

In the second interview with the instructor, she explained the way she incorporates various aspects of self-directed learning and learner independence. For example, according to the instructor, the needs assessment project consists of many small assignments that students are asked to complete that lead into the midterm assignment; this guides them to “an assessment of their current language abilities in comparison to the language abilities required for success at the university.” The instructor also integrates a number of resources on the course’s webpage to assist the students in their learning. Moreover, she discusses with the students how to find resources on their own, so that the learning can be carried on after the course has finished.

To me it seemed that learner independence was an integral aspect of the course, so I was interested to find out what the instructor beliefs were regarding learner independence.

C: I get the feeling that learner independence seems to be important for you as a teacher?

I: Yes, very much so, and again this something that we discuss at the beginning of the course, first day. It’s part of the course outline. And we discuss what it means. And it is a concept that is new to some students and not new to others. And it is not something that can be necessarily just defined and students told “you have to be independent”. This is something that takes work for some students, it may be a matter of students starting to understand this very quickly or taking the whole term to grasp the idea of learner independence.

The Participants

Adam is from an Arabic speaking nation and he came to Canada one and a half years ago. When he first came to Canada, he took one ESL intensive course at the university in which this study was conducted, then switched to a different university, took three more ESL classes before moving back to the setting of the study, and took one EAP course last semester. Adam started learning English when he was in grade four. Adam’s major is engineering and he lives off campus in a one-bedroom apartment.

According to the class instructor, Adam has made progress, in that he has responded to the feedback given. When asked what examples she has seen in Adam’s writing, the instructor remarked on the first assignment she

commented that Adam needed to have clear introductions, a clear organization overall and within paragraphs, and that “he responded directly to all of the comments about the organization”. The instructor also commented that Adam’s strength seems to be time-management because he is able to plan and give assignments the time that is required.

Ben is from Vietnam, and he came to Canada one year ago. He has taken three EAP courses including the present one. He started learning English from his grandfather when he was ten years old and mentioned that English was not the first language he learned in addition to his native language, but French was. However, he switched to English because of the pressure to get a job. In Canada, he lives with his aunt, uncle, and cousin, who all speak his native language, but he only speaks his native language with his aunt and uncle because his cousin was born in Canada, therefore, he speaks English with his cousin. He noted in the interview that he tries to seek out opportunities to use the language in various settings and gave the example of speaking with people at the bus stop.

The instructor mentioned that Ben’s progress seems to be “somewhat uneven, but I think it’s there overall”. She indicated that she felt this was not that noticeable from the first to the second assignment progress; however, she did see progress from the second to the third assignment. Even though the instructor felt Ben’s progress was somewhat uneven in the written assignments, “he has made more progress verbally and orally”. In addition, the instructor mentioned that the comments she had given Ben were on having “good content, main points of support, but needing work on language use”.

Diane is from an Eastern European country and has been in Canada for one year and has taken two EAP courses at the same university. She lives in residence and seems to enjoy the experience, and likes the convenience it offers her. Diane started learning English when she was five years old from her father who is a translator of her native language into English, and vice versa. I think this is important because her father taught her and her siblings English from a young age, so when she first started learning English at school all the way through university, her “English was much better than average English ...for all the students in [her] school”, so she did not go to the classes, but received the grades and went to the “final interview”. It seemed that she felt because of her experience of learning English in school led to a lot of problems with “the knowledge, all the grammar” and then had to start over in a sense. The idea of improving her grammar seems to be important for Diane, which is displayed in the results section.

In the second interview with the instructor, she felt that Diane’s progress was the most significant compared to the other two students. When asked what signs of progress she had seen in the first interview, she indicated that there was an “instant response” to the feedback provided. According to the instructor, Diane had some problems in her writing and Diane was not aware of the fact that this had to do with her native language. In addition to

responding quickly to feedback, the instructor also mentioned that one of Diane’s strengths was that “she starts working right away, um very good understanding of the academic context...and if she doesn’t understand it, she works at understanding it”.

For all three participants, the instructor indicated that they were in the top of their class and would probably not have any difficulties obtaining the required level of proficiency to pass the course. Moreover, from my perspective, they seem to have above average motivation when it comes to learning a language, even though Adam and Diane indicated that they have average motivation on their questionnaires, Ben did put down that he has above average motivation. This above average motivation was apparent to me since they actively seek out opportunities to use the second language.

Results

After analyzing the interview data, it appears that the three students use various indicators to develop their sense of progress. However, before discussing those findings I think it is important to start with the questionnaire data for an overall perspective, specifically question 14, which asks, “I judge my progress based upon”. Adam put that he judged his progress based on grades whereas, Diane and Ben both answered that successful use of the language was how they based their progress.

Answer	EAP	Intensive	Both
Grades (a)	3	2	5
Teacher comments (b)	3	1	4
Grades my peers get (c)	1	0	1
Comments from my parents (d)	0	0	0
How close I am to achieving my goals (e)	3	1	4
Successful use of the language (f)	2	4	6
Successful conversations (g)	0	0	0
Other (h)	0	0	0
N/A	4	0	4

Table 1 Answers to Question 14 “I judge my progress based upon”

The table above that depicts the answers for question 14 from the questionnaires that were given to the students in the EAP course and the non-credit intensive course. Adam, Ben and Diane are probably part of the data for the EAP course, permitting that they filled out the questionnaire.

The N/A row is for students who circled two or more answers or if they left it blank. Overall, the most popular answer was “successful use of the language”, then grades, followed by teacher comments and “how close I am to achieving my goals”. However, because of the small sample size it is impossible to look at the data for any definite trends.

Nevertheless, when these answers are related to Adam, Diane and Ben’s ranked answers when I asked them to rate their answers during the second interview, which are as follows: Adam: a/f/g/b/e; Diane: f/a/g/b/d/e; and Ben: f/e/a. Therefore, successful use of the language seems to be important for all three participants, and the same can be said for grades. Adam and Diane both put that successful conversations were important to them, whereas Ben did not. However, when I was going over the questionnaire with Ben he said, “I think that successful conversations is similar to the successful use of the language”, so he only put down “successful use of the language” to mean both. Another interesting finding is that both Adam and Diane put teachers comments before “how close I am to achieving my goals”, whereas Ben did not even include teacher comments in his rating.

The participants’ ratings leads me to believe that all the indicators in the question, with the exception of comments from their parents and grades their peers get, are important for students to determine their sense of progress. These answers are also the most frequent answers on the questionnaire from both courses, as indicated in bold in table 1, therefore, this partially answers some of the research questions. In relation to the second research question, “do students compare themselves”, according to the students, only one student indicated that they use grades that their peers get as an indicator of progress. However, at this point, it is hard to know if students compare themselves to peers without thinking about grades. According the to the questionnaire data, grades seem to be the second most popular indicator and all three interviewed participants included them as an indicator in their rating of their answers. Therefore, grades definitely do seem to have an affect on the students’ sense of progress, but relationship still remains a mystery.

In the following sections, I will look at what indicators could be derived from the interview data, specifically looking at how grades and the comparison to peers are discussed, along other prominent indicators that seem to emerge.

Grades

This section is related to the research questions 3 and 4 (are grades indicators of for students’ sense of progress & what the relationship between students’ perception and grades). As was evident in the previous section, grades do seem to play some sort of role in student’s sense of progress. After examining the interview data, that does seem to be the case, however, it is not straight forward and grades do not stand alone, therefore

will look at the two situations where grades are present: feedback and comparison to peers.

Feedback

One of the ways that grades were discussed was in combination with feedback that they received from the instructor. When I asked Adam about his answer for question 16 on the questionnaire, he put number 4 for how helpful feedback is in helping him progress. He said it is helpful but it is not the only thing that helps him progress. For Adam there seems to be a strong relationship between grades and feedback:

The first thing, I look at the grade if the grade is okay I won't look at the comments. I'll skip that part. If the grade is bad, I will read the comments and will see what I have to do.

It is really interesting that Adam determines whether or not he reads the comments by whether he has a good grade or not. To me this is saying that feedback is only important to him when he needs improvement as indicated by his grades. Diane, however, seems to look at feedback and grades as a form of positive reinforcement:

How helpful feedback was in helping you progress: If I see the grades and the feedback excellent, you're doing good.

In addition, Ben seems to look at grades as a form of reinforcement:

Before getting the assignments' grade I feel like nervous after I receive the grade. If the grades is bad like, oh my god, I get bored, but if the grades is good ...I also look at the comment from the instructor to improve [my English].

For these students, grades and feedback seemed to be related. In the case of Adam, if the grades were good he would skip over the comments from the teacher. Where as Diane and Ben seem to view grades and feedback as a source of reinforcement.

Comparison to Peers

This section is in relation to research question 2 (do students compare themselves to others) and 3 (are grades an indicator of progress) as was decided under the heading of grades. Adam and Diane both expressed occasions in which they compared themselves to their peers for an indication of progress. This is a contradiction to both of their ratings of question 14 of the questionnaire. Ben, however, did not seem to compare himself to other students and on his questionnaire for question 3, he put (d) that he does not compare himself to others because "I do not do that because I'm improving this for myself. So I don't have to be jealous". In the occasions in which

Diane and Adam compared themselves to other students, they both compared to other students and mentioned grades at the same time and one time Adam compared himself to other students but didn't talk about grades. I am going to talk about this first and then all the times that Diane and Adam compared to peers with the mention of grades.

In this next example, Adam is talking about how he likes the fact that he can easily write multiple pages, he then remarked that he felt good when some students admired he was writing a 16 page paper and they were in their 4th year. It seems that Adam is comparing himself to students who are at a higher academic level, which is where he would like to be one day, and therefore he feels really good that students at that level are amazed he can write so many pages:

For the first project and I met [some students] in the library. When they saw me they ask what are you doing? - I am writing a paper...they say, how many, I say 16. They say wow...I felt good because if I see students from the fourth year doing the same thing.

In the following two examples are from the first interview with Diane, she is providing examples of when she compares herself to her classmates and that it sometimes makes her feel "upset" and sometimes "happier":

Like [Jane]² got a better mark on her portfolio...and I was like okay when I just read the introduction, I was like okay, no problems.

When Diane compares herself to her peers, she feels happier if she sees that the grade her peer gets is deserved for the work done. Another instance of where she feels happier, is when someone compares themselves to her and she seems to take it as a compliment when they want to use some of her work in the future as an example.

Today in class, because I got 8.5 on the log 3 ... [George] asked me how much did I get and I got 8.5 and he asked me to send him my log...He read it he was like good conclusion, good introduction. So he will use it in future because he was like got 7.5 and he of course he wants to improve his mark.

² The original names have been changed to protect the identity of the student named

Whereas the next example, shows when Diane feels upset when she compares herself to her peers. Diane feels that Jon got a better mark than she thought he should and this made her feel upset.

Like no way, for example, [Jon] he got ...his essay back he got 9 out of 15. Like I read his essay the time the day that he wrote it. I looked at his. I was like 7.5 is like the maximum ...because no statement, no thesis, no bibliography, no background information, no connection between sentences...I was surprised that he got 9 out of 15, and so yeah I compare marks all the time. It's normal.

When I was going over the questionnaire with Adam, we were looking at question 17 for how he feels he is doing in his writing. He put number 3 because he said that “I don’t want to be bad. I want to be very, very good. Perfect...I feel my writing okay but last time I had a friend who got a better mark than me”. Since his friend got a better mark than he did, Adam asked her to give the assignment to him. After looking at it he said that he “felt confused” because hers was only two paragraphs whereas his was five, and his “was the main idea, supporting idea examples that’s it, but she explained further, she gave an example, from real life. Then when asked whether he compared himself to her he responded:

Yeah. I compare myself to [Jen] for sure because she is getting good marks and I want to get good marks. Last time I got 7.5 she got 8.5. And when we did the last assignment, she got 9 out of 10, I got 8 out of 10.

Even though Adam does not understand how his peer got the higher mark, he wants higher marks and will try to get them by using her work as an of what he wants to obtain.

Ben said that he does not compare himself to other students and the interview and questionnaire data seems to support this. Whereas Diane and Adam both show signs that they compare themselves to others to feel better about their progress in learning English, but to also see how they can improve as in Adam’s case. Moreover, when they compare themselves to other students, it appears that Adam and Diane use grades as benchmarks for the basis of comparison.

Successful Use of the Language

An interesting indicator that emerged from the interview data was that all the students looked to their successful use of the language to judge their sense of progress. When coding the interview data, I defined a successful use of the language incident as a concrete event, namely, that the students talked about a change in their language ability, either in a negative or positive sense. It

seems that there are at least three types of successful use of the language incidents: real communicative language tasks, intended language use, and academic use of the language.

Real communicative language incidents are where students assess their progress based on daily events that happen as a result of living in the target language environment. In this first incident, Diane is explaining why she rated “successful use of the language” as number 1 for question 14 on the questionnaire, and how she knows that her English has improved since her arrival in Canada: “It was very hard speaking on the phone. Right now, it is almost okay. ...so successful use of the language is like the best judge of my progress, I think”. What is really interesting is before Diane made the previous comment, she had originally put grades as number 1 and then changed her mind: “it’s like everything [we] judge [is] based upon grades, but grades doesn’t show your English [outside the classroom]”. Therefore, it seems like Diane’s first reaction was to use grades to judge her progress, but after thinking about it for awhile she realized that grades are not a good indicator for all the times she uses English.

Another incident was from the first interview with Diane, she was talking about the problems she had with English. As an example, she referred to a time when she read an old letter that she had written the previous semester and was amazed at how many mistakes she made. “I read my letter that I wrote to someone in English in September, it is just like, oh my gosh, how could I write it. There was a huge amount of mistakes...there was run-on sentences”. This is an example, of where Diane is concerned about her grammar looks at this as a form of progress.

The next real communicative incident is from the first interview with Ben, he is remembering one of his first experiences of trying to use English shortly after his arrival in Canada. He indicated that he felt he had trouble communicating because he was not used to the accent.

I tried to check in the hotel and to get a room to stay in and ...I don't get 50% of what he said...,but after that I tried to speak and tried to get used to speaking to ...a lot more people meet everyday on the street on the bus everywhere I'm getting better.

I find it necessary to perceive real communicative language incidents and intended use of the language for practice incidents as distinct since their purposes are different. In the former, students that function in an ESL environment are required to use the target language, whereas in the latter students are seeking out opportunities for language use. The major difference between the two is with the intended use of the language incidents the students communicate in the target language for the purposes of improving the language, and therefore have a heightened level of awareness for feedback. However, in real communicative language incidents the

students may not be actively seeking feedback and the indicator is only a by-product of trying to survive in an ESL environment. Thus, they may use the indicator differently.

Even though the previous incident is a real communicative language incident, it seems that Ben mainly uses incidents of intended language use to judge his progress because in the interviews he always discussed about how he likes to seek out opportunities to practice his English. This is evident in the next incident where Ben is comparing how he perceives his progress through reading the newspaper: “When I came to Canada, at the first time when I read the newspaper. The [newspaper’s name] 80% I got, but now I think it is 90%. It is good.” This could also be seen as a real communicative language incident, but it is not essential for survival to read the newspaper and since Ben actively seeks out opportunities to improve his language abilities, I think it is a intended language incident.

In academic language use incidents, the particular learner is describing an example of them completing an academic task that they are using this to assess their progress. I think academic language use incidents are important for students in an EAP course or for those who are studying at an English speaking university. In an academic environment, students’ awareness about their need to improve in their academic language use is probably stronger, and therefore they seek out indicators that will help develop their sense academic language progress. This seemed to be apparent in the interviews with Ben. He would sometimes ask if he was using the right words, if they were academic enough.

This next academic language use incident is from the first interview with Diane, where she is discussing her original dissatisfaction with a previous ESL course because she was unhappy with the number of essays and short-answer tasks that she had to write on what she thought was a similar topic. It was not until she had to complete a similar task in a content course that she realized the tasks helped and she was also able to realize the progress she had made.

Just two months later, I had the task on my economic class and I had to write short answer questions. And I realized it was much easier for me...to read the textbooks, to understand it, to memorize the information because I don’t have to think about how this word will be translated.

In the next academic language incident, Adam is giving an example where he seemed really proud that he is now able to write an essay that is a number of pages long:

If I am required to write three to four pages, it is nothing because I can write more than that because of this course...I wrote 16 pages, I guess.

Conclusion

Even though students used looked at feedback and comparison to their peers as feedback as an indicator, I think a distinction should be drawn between an indicator that is used to judge how well they think they are doing in a course and one that is used to judge how well they think they are doing in learning English. Feedback and comparison to peers seem to be used to judge the former, whereas successful use of the language was used to judge the latter. All three students used successful use of the language incidents; Diane seems to use real communicative and academic use of language as indicators, whereas Ben mainly used real communicative and intended use of the language incidents as indicators of progress, and finally, Adam mainly drew on academic use of the language incidents. Therefore, successful use of the language seems to be quite important for judging one's progress, but the different contexts that the student looks at, such as an academic context or real communicative setting, might be related to the student's goals for learning English.

What is striking from the interview data, grades are dependent on another factor. It appears that grades coexist with feedback or as benchmarks for comparison to other students. I must admit that this is a contradiction to what I expected to find because I thought that grades would play a more important role in students' sense of progress.

When I went through the interview data for indicators of sense of progress, I looked for concrete examples of where students felt they had made progress. However, I interviewed Ben, he rarely used specific examples and so it was difficult to find indicators of progress for him using the coding system I used.

The students that participated in this study are from an EAP course, which had the students assess their own progress as one of the assignments. Now, over the course of the interviews, the students did not make any direct reference to any particular assignment, or if they did they referred to them as log #2 or the essay, so I do not know if they were consciously thinking about self-assessment. Nonetheless, I believe that since the students went through the process of self-assessment this would have influenced some of their answers. Moreover, these students are in the top of their class and are excellent language learners, thus their descriptions of their indicators of progress are highly specific and as a consequence not generalizable to any other population.

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Appendix A

Interview One, Student Questions:

Background Questions

1. Where are you from?
2. How long have you been in Canada?
3. Have you been at Carleton the whole time?
4. What kind of living arrangements do you have here in Ottawa?
5. How do your parents feel about you studying at an English speaking university?
6. How did you start learning English? Describe the program.
7. How many courses have you taken at Carleton?
8. How much time would you say you spend studying English?
9. How important is it for you to improve your skills in English?
10. Is there something that helped you learn English more than anything else?

Progress Related:

9. What do you think you need to improve on?
10. Are you satisfied with the progress you have made so far?
11. What are your goals for learning English?
12. What difficulties do you think you face when learning English?
13. Are there times when you're feeling you're not learning much?
14. Can you tell me about your level of comfort using English outside the classroom?
15. What do you think are your strengths in English?
16. What do you think are your weaknesses in English?
17. What do you think are the goals of the course?
18. What do you think are your strengths in this class?
19. In the classroom, do you compare your performance with your peers' performance? In what ways?

Teacher Questions - Interview One:

Course Related Questions:

1. What do you think is the purpose of the course?
2. What do you hope the students are able to do at the end of the course?
3. How long have you taught this course?
4. What factors do you think contribute to students making progress in your course?
5. What difficulties do you think the students face when learning English?

6. How about in your course?

Specific Student Questions:

7. Has student X made progress in your course?
8. What examples of progress have you seen?
9. Have you seen the students make progress with things that are not related to your course?
10. What do you think are student X's strengths?
11. What do you think are student X's weaknesses?
12. How does student X compare to his/her peers?

Teacher Questions – Interview Two:

Course related Questions:

1. Do you think you have control over the students' learning? How much?
2. Does it differ from student to student?
3. How much control do you think the students have over their own learning?
4. What resources do you think are important for that?
5. How responsibility do you think the student should take for their own learning?
6. How do you see your role as a teacher?

Student Related Questions:

7. Have you noticed a change in X's progress?
8. Would you say X is consistent in his/her progress?
9. Is there anything that you think is holding X back in his/her progress?

Appendix B

Questionnaire

Your response is optional and anonymous – Please do NOT write your name on this Questionnaire

1. How would you describe your progress in English since you have been in Canada?

- | | |
|--|----------------------------|
| (a) fantastic and beyond my expectations | (c) a little disappointing |
| (b) satisfactory | (d) very disappointing |
| | (e) I do not know |

2. What are your goals for learning English?

- | | |
|--|--|
| (a) to speak and write perfectly like a native speaker | (c) to speak and write just well enough to complete my studies |
| (b) to speak and write very well but not like a native speaker | (d) to speak and write just enough to pass the CAEL |
| | (e) I do not have any goals |

3. How do you feel you are doing in English?

- | | |
|---|--|
| (a) much better than other students and friends | (c) not as well as other student and friends |
| (b) as well as other students and friends | (d) I do not compare myself to others |

4. The main reason I am doing better than I expected in English is

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| (a) my own effort | (e) I had too low expectations |
| (b) my teachers | (f) Other: |
| (c) the way English is taught here | (g) I am not doing as well as I expected |
| (d) what I do outside the classroom | |

5. The main reason I am not doing as well as I expected in English is

- | | |
|---|--|
| (a) my lack of effort | (e) I had too high expectations |
| (b) my teachers | (f) Other: |
| (c) the way English is taught here | (g) I am not doing worse than I expected |
| (d) the difficulty of using English outside the classroom | |

6. I consider myself to have

- | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------|
| (a) above average motivation | (d) no motivation |
| (b) average motivation | (e) I do not know |
| (c) below average motivation | |

7. If the teacher leaves the classroom, I

- (a) only speak to my friends and classmates in our native language
- (b) usually speak to my friends and classmates in our native language
- (c) speak to my friends and classmates in our native language only if necessary
- (d) avoid speaking to my friends and classmates in our native language
- (e) do not speak at all

8. How many of your friends in Canada speak your language?

- (a) all or almost all of them
- (b) most of them
- (c) half of them
- (d) less than half of them
- (e) none or almost none of them

9. Outside of the classroom, how much do you use your own language?

- (a) almost all of the time
- (b) most of the time
- (c) half the time
- (d) less than half the time
- (e) almost never

10. The methods and ways of teaching English used in classes at Carleton

- (a) are similar to those used in my country
- (b) are different from those used in my country and this helps my progress
- (c) are different from those used in my country and this blocks my progress
- (d) are different from those used in my country but this does not affect my progress
- (e) I do not know

11. How do the difficulties you face in learning English in Canada affect your progress?

- (a) They are very serious and make it impossible to succeed
- (b) They are tough but with very hard work I think I can succeed
- (c) They are tough but I will have no problem succeeding
- (d) There are no serious difficulties for me
- (e) I do not know

12. Which area is most important for you to improve?

- (a) speaking
- (b) writing
- (c) reading
- (d) understanding/listening
- (e) all of them

13. What affect do the cultural differences between Canada and your country have on your English learning

- (a) they make my progress in English very difficult
- (b) they make my progress somewhat difficult
- (c) has no effect
- (d) helps my progress

14. I judge my progress based upon

- (a) grades
- (b) teacher comments
- (c) grades my peers get
- (d) comments from my parents
- (e) how close I am to achieving my goals
- (f) successful use of the language
- (g) successful conversations
- (h) other:

15. I believe I will

- (a) speak and write English perfectly like a native speaker
- (b) speak and write English very well but not like a native speaker
- (c) speak and write English just well enough to complete my studies
- (d) just be able to survive in English
- (e) other

16. Indicate how helpful feedback has been in helping you progress

not helpful			very helpful	
1	2	3	4	5

17. How much progress do you think you have made in the following areas so far?

	no progress			very good progress	
	1	2	3	4	5
Writing	1	2	3	4	5
Speaking	1	2	3	4	5
Reading	1	2	3	4	5
Listening	1	2	3	4	5

18. How accurately do you think your grades represent your progress?

not at all			very accurately	
1	2	3	4	5

