Title	Know Thyself : A Practical Report on Raising Psychological Literacy in the Content-Based EFL Classes
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Citation	言語文化共同研究プロジェクト. 2024, 2023, p. 14-22
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/97335
rights	
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Know Thyself: A Practical Report on Raising Psychological Literacy in the Content-Based EFL Classes

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1. Introduction

In this article, I offer a practical report and a reflection on the efficacy of a content-based English course for first-year university students that aimed to enhance their psychological literacy and critical thinking skills. Twenty-eight students participated in a semester-long course focusing on communication skills through group work and interactive lectures. The class met once a week for fifteen weeks. The textbook I chose for this course, *Letters To A New Student – Tips To Study Smarter From A Psychologist*, covered psychology-related content topics, such as attitudes, stress, wellbeing, motivation, etc., which I believed would cultivate students' self-knowledge and self-awareness while enhancing their understanding of basic psychological concepts.

After a brief introduction of the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of my pedagogy, I will describe how the course was run, and how I made the students play an active role in their learning. Offering some preliminary results, I will also briefly reflect on two kinds of qualitative data accumulated during the course, i.e., a) students' reflections in their end-of-semester portfolios to review the level of their reported content learning, and b) students' post-lecture presentation reflections, and peer comments, shared on a digital platform after each class to illustrate their work in and outside of the classroom. Finally, I will advocate for course designs prioritizing meaningful engagement with and among the learners at the core, recognizing the importance of understanding oneself, and fostering holistic education.

2. Philosophical and Psychological Underpinnings of My Practice

What helps our students thrive and flourish in school and in life? Which skills, nurtured in our language classroom at the tertiary level, are essential for the remaining rapidly evolving current times? What is the relevance of foreign language education in the era of smart translation and soon-to-emerge intelligent interpretation technologies that are being developed at an unprecedented speed? The questions get bigger and bigger, and we may easily immerse ourselves in philosophical thinking. Such philosophical inquiry is certainly valuable, and the course I am reporting about started exactly in such manner – philosophical.

Know Thyself, which today translates to understanding oneself and, consequently, understanding those around us, is one of the guiding principles in my teaching. There are many psychological processes that not only we as educators should be aware of, but we should also explicitly make our learners understand. It can help them make sense of their experiences. I particularly saw the value of incorporating the topics relating to psychological literacy into the course titled Integrated English (IE) (Content-based English).

2.1 *Psychology-Informed Pedagogy and Soft-CLIL Approaches*

My own research interests revolve around the psychology of language learning, particularly motivation, positive communication, and savoring learning and speaking foreign languages over one's lifespan. Concepts from positive psychology, now a well-established subfield of psychology, have been informing my pedagogies for some time. However, while making use of such concepts and constructs, I also want to explicitly teach them to my students, for which the soft-CLIL approaches have proven successful.

For instance, Nishida's research in 2021 found that tertiary-level students responded positively to soft-CLIL classes, which focus on developing language competency while introducing content. This approach is seen as effective for preparing students for a globalized future and equipping them with language skills and relevant knowledge for their careers.

Also, informed by the work of Mercer et al. (2018), who advocated for merging positive education with language education, emphasizing the importance of promoting wellbeing alongside

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language learning, I consciously started to incorporate activities related to positive psychology. Mercer with colleagues proposed a framework for Positive Language Education, which "…involves integrating non-linguistic and linguistic aims in sustainable ways which do not compromise the development of either skill set, or overburden educators," and can be implemented in diverse cultural and linguistic settings. For example, I have been using Mirivel's Model of Positive Communication (see Zaborska, 2022) to address students' foreign language speaking anxiety through their creative process of dialogue skit writing and presenting. My findings suggested that this approach enhanced learners' subjective wellbeing and improved their linguistic abilities.

2.2 *From 'Know Thyself' to Psychological Literacy*

Questions like, 'Who am I?' and 'Why am I the way I am?' or 'What can/cannot I change about myself?' and 'How should I be?' can be approached from the philosophical point of view. For a short and comprehensive overview of the topic of philosophy of mind and self-knowledge, see "Know Thyself: The Value and Limits of Self-Knowledge" by Mitchell S. Green (2018, Routledge). However, it might be easier to present the topics of self-awareness and self-knowledge to our students from the psychological standpoint. Where to start then?

In my communicative English (English Performance Workshop) classes, having students take personality tests, such as 16 Personality Types Test or VIA (Value in Action) Test and letting them ponder, compare, and discuss their beliefs, tendencies, and signature character strengths have proven beneficial. It enables them to talk about (and among) themselves in a deeper and more erudite way, with much better vocabulary. At the same time, students often report that the activities involving the results of their personality tests made them think about themselves in a way they have not experienced before. The lack of basic psychological knowledge is always evident, and I wanted to address that.

Psychological literacy is the capacity to adaptively and intentionally apply psychological science to meet personal, professional, and societal needs (Cranney & Dunn, 2011). Originally meant to be acquired by the graduates of psychology, psychological literacy has become relevant for the students of all the disciplines and for the wider population. Hulme and colleagues (2015) in their *Psychological literacy: A multifaceted perspective* write, "…traditionally, academics have claimed ownership of psychological knowledge. However, in modern times, there has been a democratisation of knowledge; access to psychological knowledge is widely available through the internet, and it is becoming increasingly important for individuals to be able to evaluate critically, select appropriate material and synthesise information, rather than simply acquire it."

3. Course Description

Integrated English (IE) (Content-based English) is one of five types of courses offered by the Center for Multilingual education at Osaka University, other four being IE (Project-based English), IE (Liberal Arts & Sciences), IE (Performance Workshop), and IE (Academic Skills). All these are semi-compulsory courses within the general education curriculum, serving mainly the first and second-year students.

According to the description and explanation about IE (Content-based English) on the university website, the aim of the class is to broaden students' knowledge of academic fields and to develop English language skills that will enable them to understand and discuss such fields in English. In order to enhance learning effectiveness, it is important to learn about academic fields related to the class, whether in English or Japanese. (*Center for Multilingual Education*, n.d.)

3.1 *Aims*

Throughout the course, I aimed to 1) introduce and discuss effective study skills for university students, 2) provide students with many opportunities to nurture active and critical listening and thinking, 3) help students to form and develop informed opinions, 4) enhance students' intrapersonal and interpersonal communication skills (in class and online), 5) improve students' group presentation skills, and 6) allow students to practice positive (foreign) language communication.

3.2 *Students*

Originally thirty-four students enrolled in the course. Two of the students were 4th-year students who only registered and never came to class, along with one 1st-year student. Three students stopped coming to class fairly early in the course. A mixture of the first-year students from the School of

Science (Department of Chemistry), School of Engineering (Department of Adaptive Machine Systems and Division of Electronic and Information Engineering) and some other departments enrolled in the course. Six students took my class also in the spring-summer semester and thus were familiar with the way of my instruction.

3.3 Study Skill Book as a Textbook
For the textbook, I chose *Letters To A New Student – Tips To Study Smarter From A Psychologist*, (ISBN 9780429432026, 138 Pages, 2019, Routledge), which is a study skill book written by Gary W. Wood for new university students with the aim to take a holistic approach to learning. There is a paperback version and a digital Kindle version. Wood uses principles of human psychology, teaching, and coaching practice. The author offers a refreshing approach to study skills and learning techniques, and covers topics of attitudes, stress, wellbeing, motivation, cognition, context, emotions, techniques, assignments, revision, and support in a simple and accessible language. According to the author, each chapter can be read in about ten minutes, in any order. In the end of the book, in the chapter Notes, three to four additional sources related to each chapter's topic are listed. Out of the eleven topics, the following seven topics were discussed in the course: attitudes, stress, wellbeing, motivation, cognition, context, and emotions.

3.4 An Online Platform
As an online platform, I have utilized Microsoft Teams. I created a Team for the class and invited all the students as members. Within the Team, there was a channel for each class meeting, where everything related to that particular class would be kept. Besides the automatically generated General channel and the channels I set up for Class 01 ~ Class 15, I also created separate channels for Assignments, Exam=Portfolio, and Useful Resources. (See illustrative screenshots in Appendix.)

Having everything organized in this way functioned mainly in two ways: 1) as a safety net: students who might have felt anxious about missing or not understanding properly any important information or instruction when it was communicated orally in class, would find the notes on the designated channel, and 2) as a platform for online interaction among the students that was visible to all class members. (See 3.7 *Classwork and Homework* for more details.)

3.5 Developing Good Group Dynamics and a Sense of Belonging
Since my intention was to let the students work in groups, developing good group dynamics and a sense of belonging was crucial, especially because the students were not necessarily from the same departments or divisions. Even if they would meet in some other classes, these would be mainly specialized lectures with very little interaction among the learners and so almost no time to form friendly or collegial relationships.

3.5.1 Getting to Know Each Other
The first two class meetings were dedicated to getting to know each other. After posting brief self-introductions on Teams, students paired up and created a dialogue between themselves, a sort of a dialogic self-introductions. The audience was asked to post their comments or additional questions on Teams. (See illustrative screenshots in Appendix.) This helped students to become closer in a relatively short time.

3.5.2 Group Work as an Active Learning Strategy
Students created seven groups of four or five members and these groups worked together during the whole semester, regardless of their role in class. Each group was in charge of one chapter/one topic from the textbook, and in one class, when that particular topic was being discussed, they would act as presenters/lecturers/instructors. For the remaining time, they would participate in class as the audience/learners in the same groups. In the following section, I explain what their respective responsibilities were.

3.6 Students' Roles in Class
In this section, I share the actual instructions from the course, as they were communicated in class and on Teams in a post titled *How to Prepare, How to Engage*.

3.6.1 *Audience = Students*

Before the lecture presentation:

1.Read the chapter scheduled for the following class so that you know what will be covered in the lecture.

2.Take notes of the most important points in your notebook.

3.Write any questions or comments as they arise while you are reading the chapter at home.

During the lecture presentation:

1.Listen carefully, actively, and critically.

2.Take notes into your notebook: Notes about the content + Notes about the lecture.

After the lecture presentation:

1.Reflect on your understanding of the topics covered in the lecture.

2.Write your comments to the presenters/lecturers on Teams as a reply to the post *Today's PRESENTERS/LECTURERS/INSTRUCTORS.* Length: 50-70 words. Deadline: By midnight before the following class.

3.Write your informed opinion on (some of) the topics covered in the lecture that made an impression on you or that made you think more deeply. Length: 100-150 words. Deadline: By midnight before the following class.

3.6.2 *Presenters = Lecturers (The Group in Charge of an Interactive Lecture Presentation*)*

Before the lecture presentation:

1.Individually, before your group meeting in-person or online communication, read the whole chapter that is assigned to you. Check the relevant pages in *NOTES* at the end of the book. Think of ways or activities you can involve your audience/students.

2.Brainstorm together what topics from the chapter you want to explore further. Decide who covers what part. Make sure what you cover does not overlap with your co-presenters.

3.Meet in person and rehearse.

During the lecture presentation:

1.Make sure every member of your group has all the final materials/ PowerPoint that you will use in your lecture.

2.Interact among yourselves and with your audience/students.

After the lecture presentation:

1.Reflect on your lecture presentation and on your experiences during the preparations. Length: 100~ words. Deadline: Within 10 days from your lecture presentation.

EVERYONE: Note that a reflection or an informed opinion is not simply a summary.

*Presenting/lecturing group had the whole class, or 90 minutes at their disposal. Whenever I saw it appropriate, I would add further comments related to the topic brought to attention by the group in charge.

3.7 *Classwork and Homework*

In-class, in-person activities included listening to the lecture and participating in whatever the group in charge had prepared for their classmates in the audience. These included short quizzes, group discussions and opinion exchanges, brief games or exercises and actually trying out and practicing various techniques introduced in the textbook or from the extra materials prepared by the presenters. If there was time towards the end of the class, students were allowed to start writing their comments online on Teams on the designated channel.

For their homework assignment, students were asked the following: Audience/Students: read chapter XYZ and take notes in your notebook. Presenters/Lecturers/Instructors (e.g., Group 1): Prepare your interactive lecture presentation on XYZ. (See Appendix for illustrative screenshots of the students' responses to posts for 1) their comments for the presenting group, 2) their informed opinion, which they formed based on their own reading of the relevant part in the textbook and the information they learned in class from their peers, and 3) their reflection on their presentation if they were in charge).

3.8 *End-of-Semester Portfolios*

At the end of semester, students submitted their summative-reflective portfolio. In class 11, they were allowed to work individually on their portfolio draft. I uploaded a master copy of the portfolio

framework in a Microsoft Word document, which students downloaded and started to fill out with their work already posted on the channels on Teams up to that point. The final version of the portfolio framework was updated with spaces for writing their "afterthoughts about, impressions of, and reflection on this class" for all the classes individually, including the reflection on class 16 dedicated to finishing their summative-reflexive portfolio. The students were also asked to write a short paragraph in which they would reflect on the whole course.

Very rich qualitative data from students' portfolios illustrate their learning experience, i.e., how and what they learned, which implicitly shows how the course contributed to their psychological literacy.

4. Reflection on Reflections

In the end of the course, 26 students submitted their portfolios. It is beyond the scope of this article to offer their detailed qualitative analysis, of more than 72,000 words. However, upon reading student's posts after every class over the course of the semester, I am convinced of the efficacy of the course. Due to space and time restraints, here I pay closer attention to the students' final reflections on the whole course which they wrote at the end of their portfolios (almost 5,000 words in total). The following key points emerged. Some are followed by illustrative, unedited quotes from the students.

1.   Positive impact of learning methods. Students reported learning effective learning methods, realizing what their previous inefficiencies were. Especially lessons on stress management, motivation, and positive mindset were appreciated.

Student 1: *"I learned the methods in order to improve my learning. I have absorbed information through listening to other group presentations and researching the things that about my group presentation. The methods can improve my life. Before this class, I thought that I was a incompetent person when I was not able to study enough. However, through this class, I realized that I am not a incompetent person, but the methods were not effective."*

2.   English Expressions Skills. Students reported that their skill to express themselves in English improved through writing the posts, speaking with their peers, and making presentations. Several students emphasized the importance of effective English communication skills.

3.   Presentation Skills. Students gained confidence in presentation skills, finding group work and presentations less challenging and more engaging. Several of them also reported they learned the importance of asking questions and engaging the audience for effective presentation.

Student 4: *"Up until now, when I gave presentations, I just gave explanations. However, in this class, I learned the importance of asking questions and making the audience think. By having audiences think about what I want to convey in my presentation in advance, I can leave a strong impression. I would like to give such a presentation from now on."*

4.   Understanding Psychology. Students appreciated the in-depth exploration of psychology topics like attitudes, stress, and wellbeing. They also found classes interesting in relating psychology to study methods.

Student 8: *"Each topic was familiar with our lives, but the contents of the lectures were deeper than I thought. Before I took this class, I did not have any routines or ways to increase my motivation, so I was able to gain a lot of beneficial information through this class. Especially, in my case, the lecture of good stress and the lecture of music were helpful to concentrate on studying."*

5.   Class Format and Activities. Students found the class content enriching and appreciated various activities. They also discovered the value of communicating with others to gain a deeper understanding of topics.

Student 9: *"I learned a lot in this lecture about how to understand things better. One of them is to make a group presentation on a single content. I had the opportunity to present on smell and memory in the lecture. I had never thought about the connection between smell and memory in my life, so I decided to research it using textbooks and the Internet. I was able to understand it, but found it difficult to speak in a way that my audience could understand. It was difficult to verbalize what I was thinking. Finally, after I managed to finish my presentation, I realized that I had a deep understanding of smell and memory. This experience made me think that by making an effort to communicate with others, I could also gain a deeper understanding of the topic."*

6.   Mental Health and Wellbeing. Students found good tips on mental health and appreciated discussions on maintaining physical and mental health. They understood better the benefits of and the impact of positive self-talk.

Student 5: *"The content presented in each class was new to me and provided groundbreaking tips on how to live a better life. What I particularly enjoyed was the content on radio calisthenics, which showed me that mental health has a great impact on physical health, along with the evidence behind it. I also found it very interesting to listen to the detailed explanations of how to maintain and promote physical and mental health, which were very convincing."*

7. **Interactive Learning Experience**. Students enjoyed the interactive nature of the presentations, finding them more engaging than traditional formats.

Student 10: *"The presentations in this class were much more interactive between the presenter and the audience than I had ever experienced, so it was easier to understand the content of the presentations. When I made the presentation, I thought about how to make it livelier, but as I watched everyone else's presentations, I realized there were things that could have been improved. I want to incorporate the ideas I saw in other people's presentations in this class the next time I give a presentation."*

8. **Self-Reflection and Growth**. Students discovered study styles that suit them and gained insights into maintaining a positive mindset.

Student 21: *"Before I took this class, I studied in my own style, and I thought that it was the best. But thanks to this class, I was able to realize there are other studying styles to study smarter than harder."*

9. **Motivation and Goal Setting**. Students found the course beneficial in understanding motivation and implementing effective study techniques.

Student 24: *"Throughout this entire course, the most beneficial aspect I feel is related to motivation. When it comes to actually studying, the most challenging part for me is getting started. To have a good start, I believe it's crucial to maintain high motivation. Therefore, this course has been very meaningful for me. For instance, setting rewards for myself was an incredibly effective method. I also learned a lot about memory techniques that suit my individual needs. However, what's essential now is to put what I've learned into practice. To achieve this, I want to be mindful not only before tests but also in my daily routine."*

10. **Appreciation for the Teacher**. Students expressed gratitude for the teacher's questions, explanations, and engaging teaching style.

Student 15: *"The additional questions and explanations by you during the presentation were helpful for our understanding. I was particularly impressed by the fact that loneliness and being alone are totally different. Your additional explanations were very useful for those of us who have been misinterpreting the meanings of English vocabulary. This class made me want to learn more about the essential meaning of English words. Thank you for providing me with a new interest."*

5. Afterthoughts

My overall impression was that students seemed to appreciate the interactive and student-led class format. They reported positive changes in their attitudes, mindsets, and study habits. They also acknowledged their improved language skills, and better understanding of psychological principles to enhance wellbeing. Qualitative data from the portfolios offered not only some valuable insights into students' learning experiences, but they also showcased the course's contribution to students' psychological literacy.

To conclude, psychological literacy involves understanding and applying psychological concepts in real-life situations. Soft-CLIL classes can enhance psychological literacy by integrating psychological concepts that are personally relevant to the students. And when students are enabled to collaborate, and teach their peers, they experience the so-called *protégé effect*. In other words, they invest more effort when they anticipate teaching something to others, compared to when they are learning (or being told to learn) solely for their own benefit. (e.g., Paul, 2012), After all, already the Stoic philosopher Seneca said, "While we teach, we learn."

Appendix
Illustrative Screenshots and Snapshots
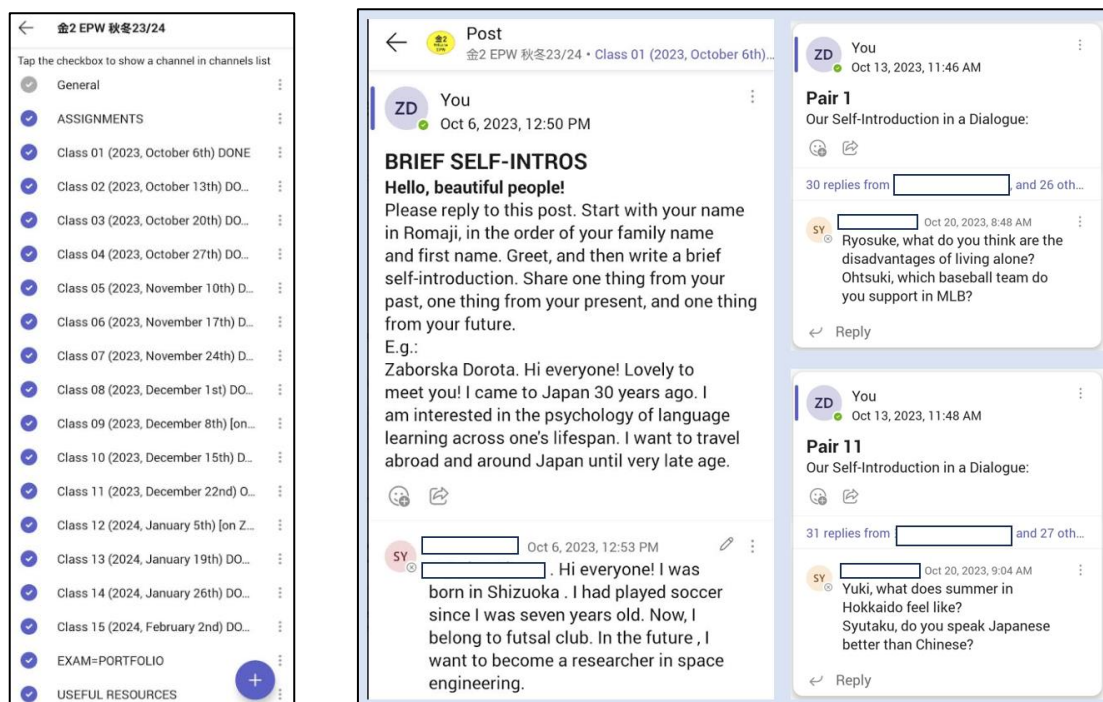
Left: Channels within the Team for the course. Right: Examples of posts from channels 01 and 02 with some student responses.
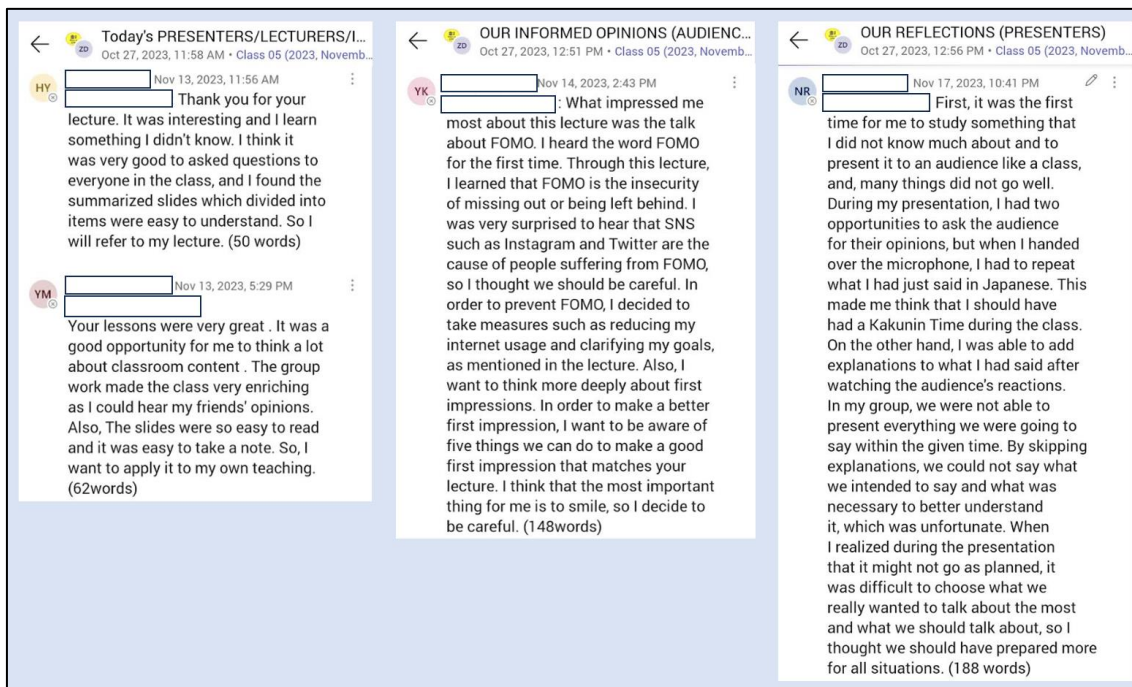
Left: Examples of the comments on the lecture presentation from the students in the audience.
Middle: An example of an informed opinion.
Right: An example of reflection written by one of the presenters/lecturers.
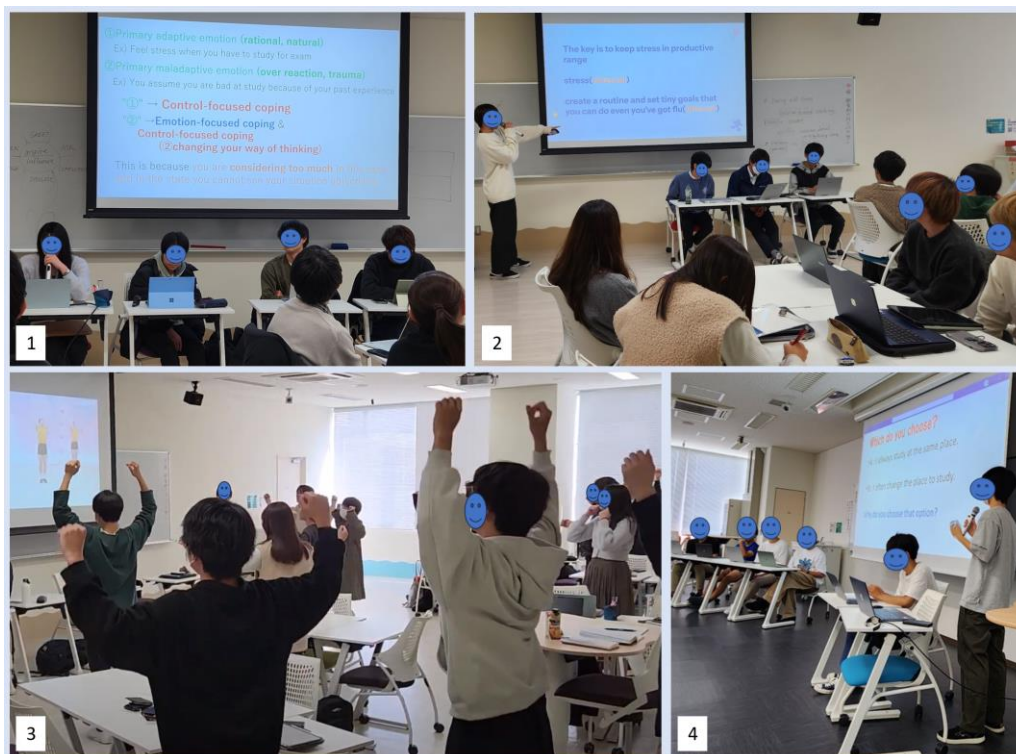
Snapshots from students' interactive lecture presentations. 1: On how to cope with one's emotions. 2: On eustress and distress. 3: A physical exercise break incorporated by the presenters into their lecture. 4: On the study environment.

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