

Improving English Speaking Classes in Japan: A Case Study on Variable Sentence Response and Conversation Cards

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Abstract

Japanese university students' changes in speaking ability and motivation to learn English as a result of participating in a class with Variable Sentence Response (VSR) and Conversation Cards activities were measured through an analysis of students' free-conversations and changes in survey responses, including free response answers to confirm causation, at the beginning and end of a semester. The transcription and analysis of the students' before and after conversations shows that conversation rate increased by a statistically significant average of 27.0%, and Japanese use decreased by a statistically significant average of 75.5%. In addition, 60% of the students were found to have experienced an increase in motivation to study English in-class (with a 5% decrease), and 25% of the students were found to have experienced an increase in motivation to study English out-of-class (with a 0% decrease).

論文抄録

日本の大学における英語のスピーキング授業で Variable Sentence Response (VSR) 及び Conversation Cards を用い、学生の英語を話す能力と学習意欲がどのように変化したかを調査した。1 学期の最初と最後で英語による自由談話とリッカート尺度によるアンケート調査を実施し、さらに授業内容とその効果の因果関係を確認するために、自由記述によるアンケート調査も行った。その結果、談話速度の平均は統計的に有意な 27.0% の上昇を示し、日本語使用は同様に 75.5% の低下を示した。学生の 60% は、授業内での英語学習意欲の向上を認め (低下を認めた学生は 5%)、25% は授業外での英語学習意欲の向上を認めた (低下した学生は 0%)。

English speaking proficiency in Japan has not fared well. Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) set a goal in which 50% of high school students in Japan would reach the equivalent English speaking skill of the Pre-2 Eiken Test or better (CEFR A2 or better) before graduating (The Japan Times, 2015). However, a recent MEXT study has shown that only 12.8% of students reach this level by their final year of high school. In addition, this study also showed that 58.3% of high school students said that they didn't like to study English (MEXT, 2015). Furthermore, Japanese business executives expressed their dismay over the English ability of their employees, claiming that although some employees do well on standardized tests, they are unable to use English in real life situations (週刊現代 [shukan gendai], 2013). From this data, we can see that there are substantial speaking proficiency and motivational issues that need to be addressed with English learners in Japan.

In an attempt to address these issues, this paper utilizes two conversational activities – Variable Sentence Response (VSR) and Conversation Cards – which have shown promise in being effective in both motivating students and increasing their ability to have free conversations for extended periods at native-like speeds (French, 2015a; French, 2015b). However, previous studies have been preliminary in nature, and have either been solely survey-based or have only included measurements after the treatment. This study seeks to further the research on these activities and hypothesizes that they will maintain their positive results in terms of the students' conversational fluency and motivation after a statistical comparison of the students' levels before and after being exposed to VSR and Conversation Cards.

Literature review

To date, there have been no quantitative studies which measure language learners' fluency improvement in free conversation. However, there have been a number of similar studies which have measured improvements in different aspects of fluency and

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conversational proficiency, although the methods which have been used to conduct these studies vary by situation. One such similar study was done by Lennon (1990), who used words per minute (WPM) to show speech rate increases through learner-only performances, such as story-telling, as a result of immersion in an English-speaking country. Another study, conducted by Nakatani (2005), used two different methods to analyze students' increases in conversational proficiency as a result of using conversational strategies during role-play interviews. The first measurement was through increases in c-unit length (also known as words per utterance), and the second measurement was through increases in rating by native speakers (specifically using the Oral Communication Assessment Scale for Japanese EFL Students for this study). Finally, research from the conversation analysis of recorded phone conversations between native and non-native speaker pairs over a period of time showed that non-native speakers improve as they "strive for 'normality' in their interaction by reducing possible forms of trouble, delays, and disturbances" (Brouwer & Wagner, 2004, p. 41).

It can therefore be seen that immersion, conversation strategies, and multiple conversations with a single partner can respectively increase WPM, c-unit length & native-speaker rating, and reductions in delays and disturbances. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses, and the reasoning for which method is used to analyze fluency in free conversation for this study will be outlined in the section below.

With regards to learner motivation, there have been many studies done on this subject, but there have been very few which specifically address the issue of which activities or teacher strategies are more motivating to learners. One of the few articles on this topic is by Guilloteaux & Dornyei (2008), who outlined 25 different classroom motivational strategies that teachers use, and then showed that teachers who use some of these strategies motivated their students more than those who didn't. While knowing that these strategies work in general is useful information, not knowing which strategies are more effective than others, and the large burden of trying to learn and use 25 different strategies, can cause problems for teachers when deciding how to best motivate their students.

Choosing an Analysis Method for Fluency in Free Conversation

In determining which analysis method to use for this study, c-unit length was determined to be an unreliable unit to measure fluency in free conversation. Although it can be utilized well in interview role-play situations where turns are clearly defined, it does not work well in free conversation situations where participants often interrupt and speak over each other, thereby prematurely ending their partner's utterance. As well, while native speaker rating systems are commonly used in research and in standardized tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC Speaking, IELTS, TEAP, STEP Eiken, etc., the monetary burden of hiring native reviewers was too great for the parameters of this study.

The final two options, WPM and reductions in delays and disturbances, were both found to produce valid measurements for this study, and the final decision to go one way or the other was determined through research relating to the Switchboard Corpus. The Switchboard Corpus contains 2,430 conversations by native speakers of English in the USA (Godfrey, Holliman, & McDaniel, 1992), and a subsequent analysis of these conversations revealed that native English speakers in the USA have a range of conversational speeds between 111-291 WPM (Yuan, Lieberman, & Cieri, 2006). Therefore, with a valid unit of measurement, and a large conversational corpus providing a native-speaker benchmark, WPM was chosen as the ideal unit of measurement for fluency in free conversation.

Description of Activities

As mentioned above, this study focuses on the effects of using two conversational activities, Variable Sentence Response (VSR) and Conversation Cards. The first of which, VSR, is an activity which aims to increase speaking and listening fluency. It begins by giving students a list of sentences which might be said in a conversation. The students then practice saying and responding to these sentences in different orders and

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with multiple partners. Through this, students are granted the ability to hold unscripted practice conversations at native English speeds. The students are also taught how to speak English quickly, so they are able to practice speaking and listening to quickly spoken English. Students are then able to gain speaking and listening fluency. Once the students have attained sentence-list fluency, the teacher has the students line up to the teacher, and the teacher goes through the students one-by-one for a quick can-do interview test on the list of sentences. The teacher says the sentences in varying orders in fast native-speed English, and the students have to understand and respond accordingly in order to pass the test. For those who do not pass, the teacher has them go to the end of the line and try again until they do. By passing this test, the students become confident in dealing with quickly spoken English, and also possibly gain new motivation to learn English as they begin to lose their fear of not being able to understand or respond to native speakers.

The second activity, Conversation Cards, uses question word card prompts to increase students' skills in question asking and general conversation. There are nine cards in this activity, and each card prompts a different question word, such as 'What?', 'Where?', or 'Why?'. The teacher puts the students in pairs, and they take turns showing a card prompt to their partner. Once shown a prompt, students must use it to make a question about the day's topic, which the other partner answers. This process of prompting questions and answering them, done with many different partners and topics, is continued until students gain a general familiarity with asking questions about the day's topic. When this happens, the teacher adds additional challenges, such as answering with more information, changing the topic, asking questions even without using the card prompts, having free conversations in only English, and finally having free conversations at a more native-like pace.

Methodology

There were a total of 20 first year Japanese university students in this study – 18 girls and 2 boys – and classes were held for 90 minutes, two times a week for fifteen weeks during the Fall, 2014 semester. All of the students were international relations majors, so while learning English was relevant to their major, it was not their primary focus. The students' average level as determined by standardized testing was a TOEIC equivalent score of 450 as determined by the Assessment of Communicative English (ACE) test.

The subject content for VSR was a storyline revolving around studying abroad, and had no relevance to the topics discussed for Conversation Cards. The topics for Conversation Cards were more general in nature and were decided by the teacher. These topics were: sports, music, weekends, hobbies, hometowns, shopping, and vacations. However, once students started their free conversation practice (as part of the Conversation Cards activity), they were free to talk about any topic that they wanted to.

Class time was divided fairly evenly between VSR and Conversation Cards. Classes often started with VSR for 30-60 minutes, and then Conversation Cards would become the main activity for the remainder of the class. By the end of the semester, the students had practiced and mastered a total of ten VSR sentence lists, with fifteen sentences per list.

Data was collected at both the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester to measure changes between the students' conversational ability and motivation to study English. At the beginning of the semester, students were told to choose a partner, any partner they wanted as long as no person was chosen twice, and have a free conversation with them for up to ten minutes while being voice recorded. This free conversation was conducted at both the beginning and end of the semester and students had the same partner for both conversations. Students were encouraged to speak all ten minutes, as fast as they could, and in only English before both recordings. In addition, for the purpose of helping students start their conversations, a starting topic was provided for

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both conversations. Once the conversation started, however, the students were under no obligation to continue speaking about that topic and were free to move onto other topics of their choice. The starting topic at the beginning of the semester was music, and at the end of the semester, weekends.

After the conversations were recorded, they were transcribed and analyzed in terms of length, English words per minute (EWPM), and percentage of Japanese words used. The transcriptions followed the Institute for Signal and Information Processing guidelines for transcribing (Hamaker, Zeng, & Picone, 1998), the same ones used for the Switchboard Corpus, aside from some slight punctuational differences (transcriptions for the Switchboard Corpus contained no punctuation for ease of processing by computer program; this study added punctuation for ease of readability). Conversation length was determined by the 10-minute mark or by a 10-second period of non-conversation. If the students were silent, spoke in Japanese, used filler words such as ‘uh’, or a combination of these three criteria for 10-seconds with no English content words, then their conversation was considered to be over. The 10-second timer was restarted when a content word in English was spoken. The EWPM of the students’ conversation was determined by manually counting all the words in the transcript, and for questionable instances, Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary was consulted (Merriam-Webster). Japanese words were counted in a similar way to the English words, however, when uncertain, Sanseido’s Web Dictionary was consulted (三省堂 [sanseido]).

Students were also given surveys and asked to rate both in-class and out-of-class motivation to study English at both the beginning and end of the semester based on a 5-point Likert scale. Once both of these surveys were received, the teacher noted which students had changed their motivational scores compared to the beginning of the semester. Afterward, the teacher gave open-ended questions to the students asking them why their scores changed. If the students answered that their motivation changed as a result of an element of VSR or Conversation Cards, then the student’s motivation was considered to be changed. If, however, the student gave any other reason, the change was

considered to be a false positive and was not included in the final data.

Results

The results of VSR and Conversation Cards were remarkably positive for both conversational ability and for motivation to study English.

Three pairs of students who were unable to hold conversations for the full 10 minutes at the beginning of the semester were able to hold them at the end of the semester (Table 1), students increased their EWPM by an average of 27.0% (Table 2), and decreased their Japanese use by an average of 75.5% (Table 3). Paired sample t-tests were also conducted between the before and after data sets for both EWPM and percentage of Japanese used, and both were deemed statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.01$. EWPM had a two-tailed P value of 0.00904, and percentage of Japanese used had a two-tailed P value of 0.00301.

In addition, while all of the students had conversations below 111 EWPM at the beginning of the semester, two pairs of students were able to speak at a pace over 111 EWPM and have conversations at native speeds at the end of the semester (Table 2).

Table 1 *Length of Conversations*

Pair #	Length before	Length after
1	10 min	10 min
2	10 min	10 min
3	5.82 min	10 min
4	10 min	10 min
5	10 min	10 min
6	3.57 min	10 min
7	10 min	10 min
8	10 min	10 min
9	2.57 min	10 min
10	10 min	10 min

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Table 2 *Data for EWPM*

Pair #	EWPM before	EWPM after	Change
1	68.1	96.0	41.0%
2	87.1	116.5	33.8%
3	51.2	84.6	65.1%
4	93.9	91.3	-2.8%
5	70.9	93.0	31.2%
6	90.3	93.0	3.0%
7	62.2	71.9	15.5%
8	69.5	79.3	14.1%
9	86.4	130.5	51.0%
10	67.8	80.1	18.2%
Average	74.7	93.6	27.0%

Table 3 *Data for Japanese use*

Pair #	Japanese before	Japanese after	Change
1	6.3%	2.1%	-66.2%
2	5.2%	2.1%	-59.8%
3	20.3%	1.1%	-94.8%
4	6.3%	0.8%	-87.9%
5	4.1%	0.5%	-86.8%
6	3.3%	1.5%	-55.3%
7	13.3%	3.7%	-71.8%
8	9.4%	2.5%	-73.8%
9	5.4%	2.0%	-63.6%
10	26.9%	1.2%	-95.4%
Average	10.0%	1.7%	-75.5%

To give an example of how these numbers translate to the students' conversations, here is the first minute of pair #3's before and after conversations.

Before: 68 English words – 0 partial words – 15 Japanese words

Girl 3: Hello.

Girl 4: Hello.

Girl 3: *nn*, I like western music.

Girl 4: *nn*. I like J-pop. *ee*, I like Triple A artist.

Girl 3: Ah, ah, ah, uh, I like Avril Lavigne.

Girl 4: *nn*.

Girl 3: *ee*. Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, One Direction.

Girl 4: Ah! One Direction!

Girl 3: *un*.

Girl 4: I like too.

Girl 3: Ah, I listen to music every day.

Girl 4: Me too.

Girl 3: I often listen to music before go to bed.

Girl 4: *un, un, un, un*.

Girl 3: But, I, I can't sleep. *dou shiyou?*

Girl 4: *ee*, ah, every day listen to music Triple A and Taylor Swift...

Girl 3: *un, un*.

After: 103 English words – 5 partial words – 0 Japanese words

Girl 4: Hi.

Girl 3: Hello. How are you?

Girl 4: I'm fine.

Girl 3: Uh, how was your weekend?

Girl 4: I went to dentist on s-, Saturday.

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Girl 3: Really?

Girl 4: Yes. And, I went to Tokyo by my father's car.

Girl 3: Oh, anything else?

Girl 4: Nothing. How about you?

Girl 3: Ah, I went Odawara.

Girl 4: Uh-hum.

Girl 3: Ah, no, I went uh, go shopping...

Girl 4: Uh-hum.

Girl 3: ...and eat lunch with my friend. Uh, we went Izunitta. Do you know Izunitta?

Girl 4: I dunno.

Girl 3: Ah, Mish-, uh, near Mishima.

Girl 4: Uh-hum.

Girl 3: And we eat, ate shabu-shabu. It is very, ver-, ver-, delicious. And, we ea-, ate ice cream and chicken.

Girl 4: Uh-hum.

Girl 3: And, curry rice, and so on.

Girl 4: There are many.

Girl 3: Yes, uh, after, uh, we went shrine.

With regards to motivation to study English both in and out of class, one false positive and one false negative were removed for the in-class motivation results, and three false positives and three false negatives were removed for the out-of-class motivation results. After the false positives were removed, 12 of the 20 students reported that they had increased motivation to study English in-class due to VSR and Conversation Cards, 1 of the 20 students reported that they had decreased motivation in-class, 5 of the 20 students reported that they had increased motivation to study out-of-class, and none of the students reported that they had decreased out-of-class motivation.

In their responses to the open-ended follow up questions for why their motivation

changed, one of the students with an increased in-class motivation wrote: “In the classes before this class there were not many opportunities to speak English, but in this class we were forced to have conversations and I feel that my conversational ability went up. When I was able to speak English, I started to get frustrated when I wasn’t able to say exactly what I wanted to say. In order to fix this, I started to want to learn more words and phrases” (translated from Japanese).

As well, the one student whose in-class motivation decreased responded: “The topics are the same as the class we had last semester, I couldn’t understand the meaning of doing the same thing again” (translated from Japanese). Unfortunately, this class’s teacher for the previous semester and the teacher for this study did not coordinate their topics. This may have been a preventable decrease had these two teachers coordinated their lesson topics.

Finally, one of the students who reported higher out-of-class motivation answered: “I became able to speak with my friends in English outside of class, and it was fun” (translated from Japanese).

Discussion

Although the data in this study was very positive, it is important to note the limitations of this study. While it clearly shows that the students in this class increased their conversational fluency and many of them experienced an increase in motivation to study English both in and out of class, it may not apply universally to all classes. First of all, it must be noted that there is no control group in this study. As such, although the hypothesis of this study was met with affirmative results, it cannot yet be concluded that VSR and Conversation Cards are the reasons why these changes occurred until these results can be compared against those in a control group. In addition, further topics of research on VSR and Conversation Cards will need to address the following four questions: (1) Does the quality of the students’ conversations also increase? (2) Are these

results replicable with another teacher? (3) Are these results replicable with students of a different ability level? (4) Are these results replicable in a country outside of Japan?

Conclusion

Overall, with three pairs of students being able to increase their conversation lengths to the 10-minute point, a 27.0% average increase in conversation speed, a 75.5% decrease in Japanese use, with 60% of students having an increase in in-class motivation, and with 25% of students having an increase in out-of-class motivation, there are a lot of potential benefits for VSR and Conversation Cards. However, it must be noted that but further research needs to be done, especially with respect to adding a control group, before it can be said for certain that VSR and Conversation Cards are solely responsible for these changes.

That said, revisiting the information from the beginning of this article that high school students in Japan are underperforming in speaking ability, that a majority of them dislike studying English, and that business executives in Japan are worried that their new hires are unable to speak English in real life situations, it is very possible that VSR and Conversation Cards can solve some of the English language instruction problems in Japan. Of course, more research must be conducted before this can be concluded, but this study is one step in that direction.

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