Conversation Evaluations for Increasing Student Motivation: Rationalizations and Methods

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Abstract

This action research report details how conversation evaluations can be used in order to increase students' motivation to use strategies which enable them to have successful and natural-sounding conversations in the target language. The conversations are recorded on video and used by both the teacher and the students for the evaluations. Student reflections after watching their own performance show increased motivation to improve their general speaking ability, as well as course-specific conversation strategies.

Keywords: conversation strategies, timed conversations, video evaluations, student motivation

Motivational Factors in Learning

Students of English in Japan have been conditioned to study hard for things that they know they will be tested on. Many have mastered the technique of memorizing facts in order to regurgitate them on the next exam. As a motivational incentive to study, regular tests are highly effective. Students will readily memorize a list of words if they know these words will be on a test. They will also study page after page of example sentences in order to see how these words are combined into sentences as long as they assume they will be tested on their knowledge of how these items are used correctly. Items which can be tested with fill-in-the-blank questions or multiple choice questions can be memorized, conveniently tested, scored, and given as feedback to students. This type of discrete-item learning and testing is an inherent part of the typical foreign language classroom in Japan. It is essential knowledge that can be evaluated and provides sufficient motivation for the learner to study in order to demonstrate how much of that knowledge he or she has acquired.

While the degree to which the retention of many facts and figures is necessary for mastery varies according to each particular area of knowledge, subjects such as science, math, history, and foreign languages do involve much memorization. Each subject may be said to have 'hard' and 'soft' areas of knowledge; wherein, 'hard' facts are those which can be learned by rote, but analysis and critical thinking is also required in order to make sense of those facts and apply the information which has be memorized.

For instance, students can memorize verb conjugations, but must also be able to choose the correct ones depending on what they are writing or talking about. Idioms can be memorized, but if not used in the correct context, the meaning will not fit the intent. Therefore the importance of appropriate usage in a given context plays a pivotal role in determining whether or not a learner has truly acquired these types of lexical items.

Being able to use words and expressions becomes more important than merely recognizing meaning, especially when it comes to spoken communication. Herein lies the crux of the matter. It is not so difficult to motivate students to memorize word meanings if they know that they will be tested on them. Much more difficult is motivating students to *use* words appropriately. The difficulty lies partly in the fact that it is much more difficult to test the ability to use a language correctly, especially in a conversational context. How can we test students for their conversational ability – the ability to use words and expressions correctly in conversation? If students know that they will be tested on their conversational ability, there is a high probability that they will be motivated to improve their usage of the language. But just exactly what can students study or teachers test on a conversation evaluation? One solution lies in teaching specific conversation "strategies" that students can memorize and practice again and again, but which are also specific items that can be tested to determine the degree to which learners have acquired them and can use them appropriately. In

addition, if students know they will be tested on their ability to use these conversation strategies, there is a good chance that they will be motivated to learn and practice using them.

Conversation Strategies

Conversation strategies can be defined as skills that help speakers maintain a conversation. They are natural, common expressions for opening and closing the conversation, showing surprise, expressing sympathy, requesting clarification, showing interest, and getting more information. In short, these are phrases that "facilitate conversation" (Kenny, 1996). Kehe & Kehe (2014) contend that having these skills is necessary for developing socio-linguistic competence so that learners can communicate in "culturally and socially appropriate ways" in the target language.

Dörnyei and Thurrell (1992) remind us that, conversations are far from being random acts; speakers tend to follow certain patterns when conversing. Unspoken, but culturally-bound rules determine such things as the order in which interlocutors speak and for how long each turn lasts. Conversations are developed and maintained smoothly due to these rules. Other "rituals and set formulae" mandate how conversations start and finish, how to change or introduce new topics, how to interrupt another speaker and how to fend off interruptions. While these so-called 'rules' remain unspoken, in order to avoid pitfalls, speakers of any given language must know and follow the culture-bound conventions specific to that language. For successful communication to occur, knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is not enough. Learners need to develop the competence to communicate with other speakers. Dörnyei and Thurrell define conversation strategies as "ways and means of helping speakers to overcome communication breakdowns, to deal with trouble spots, and to enhance fluency" (1992: xi). Some examples given by the authors are techniques for hedging, requests for clarification of meaning, explaining what they want to say when speakers cannot recall a word, and ways to highlight certain parts of a narrative. All of these strategies or skills can be directly taught and practiced in a typical English conversation class. Dörnyei and Thurrell (1992) refer to studies which have shown that conversation skills can be taught more effectively by using a direct approach rather than assuming that learners will automatically acquire them through models which they encounter in role-plays

and other communicative activities. The authors state that learners are more likely to become better at conversation more quickly if they are made aware of strategies they can use, what types of communication breakdowns could occur, and are equipped with various kinds of expressions to use in these situations.

The current paper is concerned with conversation classes that focus on learning and practicing a variety of these conversation strategies rather than placing too much emphasis on lexical items or grammatical forms. By the time most Japanese learners have reached university, they have had a solid grounding in the basics of English, and while not all learners have not completely mastered the basics, they have been thoroughly instructed and tested in them for over six years. What they often lack is any great deal of actual practice in using what they have learned out of books. In order to help student have successful conversations, they need to learn skills that will help them maintain an interaction and deal with problems that come up when speaking. In class, students are expected to remember these strategies and put them into practice each time they have conversations. (See Figure 1 for examples of communication strategies used in the current paper.) Nation (2013: 10) points out, "teachers tend to teach too much. [M]essage-focused learning ... does not occur as a direct result of direct, but occurs through having to use the language." If this is so, then the less time spent with the teacher talking, and the more time spent on student interaction, the better the possibility that learners will improve their ability to use the language.

Timed conversations

The current study focuses on an English conversation course in which students learn and practice various conversation strategies while talking about various topics throughout the year. A key component of the class is having regular timed-conversations with different partners. After preparing to talk about a topic through listening and question and answer activities, students are given a specific question on the topic and asked to think about what they are going to say during a four-minute conversation on that topic. Little or no time is spent on vocabulary or grammar instruction. Rather, timed conversations give students frequent opportunities to practice using conversation strategies and develop fluency in talking about a variety of topics.

Usually, one timed-conversation session lasts between twenty and thirty minutes of class time. The opening question is written on the board, and students are asked to stand and find a partner with whom they have not practiced on that day. Once they start talking, students are to continue talking in English about the topic until the teacher instructs them to stop. While they are talking, students are not allowed to use dictionaries, or any notes that they have prepared. During one thirty minute timed-conversation practice, students are usually able to speak about the same topic with four or five different partners. This rather intense conversation practice over and over on the same topic, has the feel of a talking marathon. In the beginning, the first few conversations are usually a bit more difficult to maintain, but students gradually become able to say what they want to say. However, there are still words that they may need to look up, so after the first couple of timed conversations, students are given the chance to quickly make notes of any difficulties that they had. Later, they can look up any words that they did not understand or remember, or ask the teacher for help

Review for Evaluation

While regular timed-conversations are valuable in themselves as a device for increasing fluency, letting students know that their conversations will be videoed and evaluated creates a high level of motivation. Murphey and Kenny (1995) note that one of the benefits of videoing is its ability to motivate students to prepare and practice for a specific goal. Naturally, it is important to let students know when they will be videoed and how they should prepare. Conversation evaluations (CE) are carried out twice a semester. One week prior to a CE, a review and practice session is held in class. Students are given a list of three to four topics which they have practiced up until that time and are told that they will have to speak for four minutes on one of these topics.

It is also important to set up clear conditions for how the CE will be carried. Students are told that they need to talk about a set topic for four minutes in English with one of their classmates. They are also informed of the criteria that they will be evaluated on: their ability to use conversation strategies; their ability to give sufficiently detailed information when speaking; and their ability to ask relevant follow-up questions and make comments about what their partner says. They are reminded that all of the

practice they have done up to that point has been to prepare them for the CE, and it is up to them to demonstrate what they have learned.

After a review of the conversation strategies learned up to that point and doing some Q&A exercises on the topics, the class practices four-minute conversations on each of the set topics. Opening questions for each topic are written on the board. Students are asked to use these questions to begin talking about the topics. Experience has revealed that students will often "waste" the first minute or so unnecessarily greeting their partner. Greetings are regularly practiced in class, but students are asked to suspend their use during the CE so that they may make the fullest use of the four-minutes allotted to them.

After each four-minute conversation is finished, students are asked to take a moment to fill out a brief self-evaluation form in order to reflect on the success of their conversation. On the form, students rank on a five-point Likert scale the degree to which they felt they gave detailed information, asked follow-up questions, used conversation strategies, and asked for clarification when necessary. The bottom of the form is left blank so that they can write notes about words or expressions that they needed to use, but could not do so satisfactorily. Each self-evaluation is put on a separate piece of paper and filled out after speaking on each topic. Students keep these cards and use them to further study and prepare on their own during the week before the actual CE is held.

To wrap up the review/practice period, students are given some general advice as to how to prepare for the CE in the following week. Beside the obvious review of the textbook activities and homework assignments, students are also encouraged to practice speaking with a partner outside of class. A lunch break could be used to practice speaking, or students could even practice talking on the phone. Students are reminded that the whole focus is on *using* the language, so the best way to prepare for a CE is by actually talking with someone. As students have a week to prepare for the evaluation, there is a likelihood that some of the students will consider writing down and memorizing everything that they want to say. They are encouraged not to do this due to the fact that, even if they prepare lines to say, they still will not know the questions that their speaking partner might ask, and might not be able to ad lib an answer. Furthermore, they are prone to forget a prepared monologue, which may result in long empty pauses during the CE.

They are encouraged to prepare some general ideas about what they want to say for each of the topics, look up any specific words they may need to use, and think of questions they could ask their partner for each of the topics, and practice as much as possible.

Videoing the Conversations

Conversation evaluations are carried out during a regular 90-minute class period.   At the beginning of class, students are given a short time to practice the selected topics during a warm-up period.   During this time, pairs are chosen but not announced yet.   Due to large class sizes (30 or more students in one class), it is necessary to record two pairs at a time in order to complete the CE during one class period.   To facilitate this, two recording areas are set up in advance.   After the warm up session, the first two pairs are announced and given instructions as to which camera they are to sit at.

During each conversation recording, the remaining students continue practicing conversations on the designated topics with a variety of partners.   After a recording session, pairs who have finished recording return to the classroom to continue practicing with their classmates.   Each time new pairs are announced and seen off to the camera areas, remaining students change partners and talk about one of the set topics.   This cycle continues until all students have been videoed.

It is optimal to have the video pairs in separate rooms and away from the whole class.   However, depending on the space available, pairs may either be in the same room together, or may even have to be in the same room with the whole class.   If other students are present, it is best to have a video camera that has a microphone input so that an external mic can be set up close to the speakers to cut down on as much noise as possible.

To keep an element of surprise and anticipation, I choose to announce partners just before it is time to video the next pairs of students.   If there is an odd number of students in the class, I choose to ask for a volunteer to be videoed twice.   A conversation involving three people usually results in one person not doing as much talking as the others.   Usually you can find at least one student who is willing to be recorded twice, especially if you console him or her by saying that only the best of the two conversations will be put down in the grade book.

It is possible to let students choose their partner by themselves.   The plus side of this is that it allows them to relax and talk more casually with someone they are accustomed to talking to.   In some cases, students open up and give more information.   In addition, lower-level students have commented that they appreciated being able to choose their own partner because it gave them more practice time.   This may be a important factor when considering whether or not to allow students to choose their own partner.

There is one distinct disadvantage, however, to allowing students to choose their own speaking partner for the CE.   With the exception of students who are chosen early on to do the videoing, when students practice many times with one partner, they might either intentionally or unintentionally end up memorizing what they are going to say about each of the topics. The obvious result of this is that all spontaneity whatsoever is lost. Subsequently, when it comes to using the conversation strategies, there is no need for students to truly be surprised or express curiosity (if called for), and there is no need to ask follow-up questions or clarify the meaning of something, for they already know what their partner is going to say.   On the other hand, if students do what is expected of them, and they use conversation strategies, the result is a stilted and forced conversation which fulfills the requirements, but does not resemble a 'natural' conversation because it has been rehearsed many times. Random assignment of pairs usually gives a better result all round. In the event that a student gets paired up with a person they do not normally talk to or someone they feel uncomfortable with, they can be reassured by the fact that they only have to talk for four minutes.   But more importantly, their conversation will be more alive and natural sounding, which will most likely result in them receiving a better evaluation.

In order to randomly put students into pairs, I use the following method.   Beforehand, prepare a list of the students' names, then cut out the names and put them in a bag.   Two at a time, pull the names out of the bag.   These two students will be paired up for the conversation evaluation.   Attach the names to a sheet of paper with double-sided tape.   This sheet has two columns: One for camera 1 and one for camera 2.   When the names are announced, students are told to go to either camera 1 or camera 2.   Students sit next to each other on one side of a table with the camera pointing at them.   It is important to keep a record of which students are sitting at which camera.   If the names of some of the students are still unfamiliar, it is a good idea to call

their names after they are seated, and note who is sitting on the left and on the right. Later, when the videos are viewed for evaluation, there is less of a chance of giving a score to the wrong person if this method is followed.

The designated topics are written on cards and put face-down on the table. One person in the pair picks a card and shows it to his/her partner. The pair is given a short time to think about how to begin their conversation, then a 'start' sign is shown so that videoing may begin as noiselessly as possible. The time is kept by using a stopwatch. During this this time, if the instructor remains in the same room, it is recommended to try and stay as inconspicuous as possible in order not to pressure the students or make them feel any more nervous that they probably already are. Students should be put in a stress-free environment so that they can feel relaxed during their conversation. When four minutes is up, a 'stop' sign is shown to the pair and the recording is ended.

As mentioned earlier, after the videoing is completed, pairs return to the room where other students are, and the next set of pairs is called. The students who remain in the classroom and are not being videoed resume practicing conversations on the set topics with new partners. This complete cycle is repeated until all students have been recorded with the video cameras.

Evaluating the Conversations

The video recordings of the students' conversations are used for two purposes: evaluation by the teacher, and a self-evaluation by the students. In order to make it possible for the students to view their videos, the files are uploaded to a website from which students can download them. Depending on the size of the video files, it may be necessary to compress the files in order to make them easier to upload and download, or if the video files are not in a standard file type, such as mp4, it may also be necessary to convert the file type itself. Software programs for doing the compressing or converting, such as Any Video Converter (Version 5.7.8), are freely available on the Internet.

A free and convenient way for making the videos available to students is to use the file sharing feature that is a part of many web-based mail servers. (*Yahoo!* makes this service available to its users, albeit there is a size limit on how much can be uploaded to free accounts.) In a *Yahoo!* account, video files can be uploaded to a "Box" and shared with other people who have access to the account. A separate account can be created for each

class, and students can be given the log in information so that they can download and view their videos. In a typical class size, there may be up to fifteen or more paired conversations on video, so it is helpful to rename the video files before uploading them so that each student will be able to easily identify which file is theirs. In a later class, students are instructed in how to access and download their videos. They are also given a self-evaluation form to fill out and hand in. This is explained below.

Students' conversations are evaluated on four points: giving detailed utterances, using conversation strategies appropriately, asking relevant follow-up questions and making comments on their own, and following the 'rules' of the conversation evaluation: maintaining a four-minute conversation, and talking about a set topic (written on the card they picked). Each student in a pair is evaluated on how well he or she participated in the conversation based on these four criteria. Successful conversationalists typically turn out to be those who give utterances with sufficient detail, yet also paused to allow questions from the listener or ask a question to their partner related to what they are talking about. Successful listeners react with appropriate conversation strategies to show interest, excitement, curiosity, concern, or simply to signal that they are listening. As follow-up questions are one-fourth of the matrix, asking appropriate questions at the right time is crucial for success. Students occasionally stray from the topic, but as long as it develops naturally, this does not seriously affect their evaluation. As long as students manage the conversation well and participate fully, it is rare that a conversation 'dies' before the four-minute time limit has been reached.

Giving feedback to the students is a necessary component in their continued improvement not only as learners of English in general, but also as participants in a university course. Students need to know how well they are meeting the requirements of the class, and they also need to be aware of how well they are performing as learners/speakers of English. Each criterion in the four-point evaluation matrix is written on small piece of paper and given to the students. Each individual in a pair is given a grade for his or her performance on each criteria, with the total making up their grade for the conversation evaluation. Individualized written comments are also given to the students as positive feedback on what they can do to improve their conversations in the future (see Figure 2).

Self-Evaluation Questionnaire

Students are asked to watch their videos several times, then fill out a questionnaire which is designed to get them to reflect on their performance during the CE.   On the evaluation form, students are asked to reflect on their conversation by answering questions that echo the four criteria in the evaluation matrix. They are given space to write about things that they felt they were able to say successfully, as well as the things that they felt did not go so well.   While most of the responses to the questionnaire concern their specific conversations, many of the comments written by students show a great deal of reflection on how their conversations went and what they wish to improve. Below are a few comments made by students:

"I couldn't make good responses and do shadowing, so next time I will try to make more responses and do more shadowing."

"I feel that my English conversation is improving gradually, but I don't ask enough follow-up questions. I want to speak more naturally by asking some questions."

"I sometimes don't come up with English [words], so I want to know more words. I think I have to practice speaking English more smoothly."

"I use 'good' too frequently when I make responses, so I will try to [use] various kinds of responses in the next conversation."

"I was able to say anything towards my partner, but I asked [only a few] questions. I should be conscious of that next time!"

"I'd like to ask my partner questions in more detail."

"I think I could enjoy talking with my partner. However, I need to use more advanced words."

"I talked too much about about my vacation. I should have asked my partner more questions about her vacation."

"My partner was good at speaking English, so I want to speak English [fluently] like her."

"When we had some time left, I only answered questions my partner asked. So I would like to give her detailed information by myself and ask her a lot."

"My responses and reactions are similar. So I want to be a good listener and be able to [use] natural responses and reactions. I want to say quickly and directly."

"My voice was so small, so [during the] next conversation, I want to speak [in] a loud voice."

"I didn't give much information, so I want to tell more information on my own."

"I couldn't ask follow-up questions many times. I just did responses, so I have to heat up the conversation."

"I want to be able to ask more questions next time."

"I was able to ask more questions this time. However, I couldn't answer my partner's questions in detail. So to be able to answer in detail next time, I will go to the English lounge and write a diary in English."

"Watching the conversation video is a little embarrassing, but I can look at our conversation objectively, so I think it's important to do it."

"I was so nervous. I'm ashamed to watch my conversation. I want to make progress in speaking and listening [to] English."

"In this conversation evaluation, I talked with my friend, so we already had talked about summer vacation. But in English, I couldn't [speak] well although the story is the same. I think I should study English very hard!"

"The conversation evaluation is very good for me in order to improve my English. I could understand the things I couldn't say well. I could understand the things that I should improve. It's important for me not only to learn English, but also to speak English."

"Speaking only English is difficult. I want to keep in mind the conversation test and use more words every time I speak in class."

"I enjoyed speaking English with my partner!"

As these comments show, by watching their own videoed conversations, students are able to reflect on what they do (and *should* do) during conversations. This is something that they normally cannot do 'on the fly' when conversing in class.   Some of the students commented specifically about which skills they want to improve (ask more questions, speak more loudly, give more information), and some commented on the videoing experience itself (feeling embarrassed or nervous).   Still yet, others mentioned the usefulness of this form of evaluation and how it makes them want to improve overall.   Perhaps the most encouraging responses, from a teacher's standpoint, were the not infrequent comments of enjoying speaking with their partner.   Even though the thought of taking any kind of test can be a daunting,

many students come to realize that the CE has its lighter side, too.

Conclusion

Teaching conversation strategies and having students use them in timed-conversations is an effective way to increase learners' fluency and use of natural-sounding expressions which also help them have successful conversations. Having regular conversation evaluations that are videoed creates an incentive for students to prepare and practice for a specific goal.   In addition, watching their videos gives students the opportunity to reflect on their success at maintaining a conversation in English.   This observation can serve as a strong motivational factor to increase their desire to improve in areas that they feel are necessary.   This ownership of their own learning feeds back into conversation practice during weekly classes, as the experience of watching themselves often makes students want to improve their overall speaking ability as well as learn to adopt strategies for having successful and natural conversations.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Example conversation strategies

Show surprise	
Wow! / Really? / No way! / What?! / Are you sure? / I didn't know that! / You're kidding.	
Use shadowing	
Repeat key words that your partner says to show you are listening and you understand	
Show interest	
Cool / Oh yeah? / Uh-huh / Mm-hmm. / Sounds / That's .... [adjective] I see. / Me, too.	
React to bad news	
Oh no! / Uh-oh! / Oh ... / That's too bad. / What a pity. / Sorry to hear that.	
Ask follow-up questions	
"Closed" questions (Yes/No questions) / "Open" questions (Wh... / How ...?)	
When you don't understand ...	
How do you say .... in English? / Pardon? / What does ... mean? / Did you say ...?	

Figure 2: Evaluation matrix

Conversation Evaluation #3	Nov 2016
NAME ST. #	
1. **Gave lots of information on your own** (25 pts.)	
2. **Used appropriate responses / Shadowing** (25 pts.)	
3. **Asked follow-up questions / made comments** (25 pts.)	
4. **Followed the instructions** (25 pts.)	
Other	

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