

From questions to conversation: An analysis of factors affecting changes in student interaction during awareness-raising instruction in active listening and back-channel responses.

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Introduction

“This class is intended to help students improve their fluency in conversation” is a variation on a theme I have often used with regard to introductory descriptions presented for the syllabus of general communication classes I have taught over the years. I have often written such introductions without truly giving much thought to what I actually meant by the terms *‘fluency’* and *‘conversation’*, despite having a vision and commitment as to what I should be doing in class to achieve the said goals. In this regard, while having the good fortune to be able to decide on my own teaching materials and create my own class routine, I have tended to take for granted that after one or two terms of practicing English communication, students would leave the course with a little more ability and confidence than when they first started. Indeed, the majority of feedback I have received seems to reveal that students have indeed felt some, albeit unspecific, improvement in their overall communication skills at the end of a course; usually that they feel more relaxed speaking in English. However, I had never actually taken the time or opportunity to try to measure if any improvement was indeed taking place, or considered any means of measurement other than producing final vocabulary tests which, in reality, revealed nothing more than proof of students having learned a vocabulary item on paper, giving no indication whether they were able to use new words actively in their interactions with other students.

The process that pushed me to investigate how students ‘actually’ interacted was inspired initially by nothing more than a hunch, based largely on a personal experience in my early twenties where I underwent a period of social withdrawal due to the untreated effects of a childhood paternal bereavement which required professional intervention. It was not the case that I could not function socially, but that I lost the confidence and ability to communicate effectively in certain situations where people of the same age would be interacting more freely.

A typical conversation at a social event such as a party or night club would usually begin and end with my asking and receiving answers to sets of questions without any possibilities for a conversation to blossom purely based, not on the fact that I was unable to speak, but that I was so self conscious of what I was saying and what I was going to say next that I didn’t engage in actively listening to any responses I got to my questions. Nor did I pick up on, or follow, any conversational theme. While such experiences

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may be more appropriately dealt with in the pages of a paper on clinical psychology, the process of change I underwent as I learned again how to interact more effectively by actually listening to an interlocutor has made me more sensitive and interested in the mechanics of how conversations develop, which in turn has led to a very great influence on my pedagogy after I became involved in language education. My premise, which, it could be argued, is over-generalized, is this: I could speak English but couldn't hold a decent conversation due to the fact that I was so pre-occupied with asking sets of formalized questions I wasn't actively responding or listening to the answers I received. This resulted in my never asking appropriate follow-up questions to answers that would have enabled me to carry a conversation forward. My question with the present research is to investigate whether I can apply the same criteria to my students. That while they may have a latent knowledge of English they have little experience of actually using what they already know to communicate actively and even less exposure on how to act as listeners. As I hope to show below, a focus on active listening in the classroom would seem to be just as important as what is produced verbally, and may be not constrained so much by linguistic ability, but rather a lack of awareness and practice of listening/responding skills in the target language. This has meant trying to make students aware that their role as listeners in a conversation are by no means passive and that acquiring the skills of responding as listeners through such linguistic references as back-channeling (verbalized sounds such as “*Mmm*” “*Oh*”, “*Really*” etc.) and follow-up questions are equally as important to the continuation and flow of a conversation as just being able to speak. This is not to say that students do not respond to conversational cues in Japanese by means of similar linguistic structures, but that they may be unaware of, and unfamiliar with the kind of cues and responses usually associated with conversational exchanges in English.

This paper represents an analysis of data collected as part of an investigation into whether students' conversational structure and fluency can be manipulated and improved through awareness raising activities in the classroom setting. The analysis involves observing any changes that have taken place within a set period, and then considering how and why these changes may have occurred. Then, from the wider perspective of other work done in the field of discourse analysis, the research sets out to examine whether any significant results are purely the product of teaching strategies and class routines, or whether other factors may need to be taken into consideration in explaining the nature of changes in conversational patterns students have produced. However, before any further discussion or analysis of data it is first necessary that I clarify what I mean by the terms ‘*fluency*’ and ‘*conversation*’ which I have tended to use rather loosely in the past as a means of describing the skill areas I want to help learners improve.

Fluency

The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (1992:141) describes fluency as the “*native-like use of pausing, rhythm, intonation, stress, rate of speaking and use of interjections and*

interruptions.”

With regard to fluency in Second Language Learning, Longman provides the following four criteria:

- I. *The ability to produce written and/or spoken language with ease.*
- II. *The ability to speak with a good but not necessarily perfect command of intonation, vocabulary and grammar.*
- III. *The ability to communicate ideas effectively.*
- IV. *The ability to produce continuous speech without causing comprehension difficulties or breakdown of communication.*

While these interpretations of fluency seem to be comprehensive, they tend to focus on language production. With regard to my present research focus, I would also include in the above, “*the ability to listen to and respond appropriately to a speaker*” and, “*the ability to develop a conversational theme.*” In this regard, although a speaker may possess all of the defined characteristics of language proficiency and are able to produce the language with an adequate level of fluency, they must also understand the socio-linguistic requirements of the target language in that they also have to participate in a conversation as active listeners as well. This means understanding how and when to respond to exchanges to indicate understanding of what is being said and also indicate interest in what the speaker is saying.

Conversation

While fluency can be defined with reasonable clarity, it could be said that what constitutes a conversation is far less easy to characterize. A general description of a conversation would be to say that it is “*A piece of discourse containing one or more topics*” (Stenstrom, 1994:139). If we consider that exchanges require individuals to take turns in constructing a piece of discourse, then at its simplest, a conversation can be defined as “*A string of at least two turns*” (Coulthard,1985: 69). A turn being “*everything the current speaker says before the next speaker takes over*” (Stenstrom, 1994: 30), which consists of one or two ‘moves’ which, at the lower end of the conversational hierarchy, is “*what the speaker does in a turn in order to start, carry on and finish an exchange*” (ibid. 30). However, to define a conversation only by turns would ignore the component of fluency of interaction whereby a conversation requires the active involvement of both parties in an exchange (ibid. 89). Meaning that the listener is “*not allowed to remain passive*” or “*to provide only silent feedback, such as head- nods, smiles and eye glances*” (ibid. 89). In other words, “*Some form of responding is expected in the form of backchannels*” (often referred to as rejoinders), which on a gradient of feedback can reflect “*empathy, enthusiasm and indignation*” as well as “*lack of interest, indifference or impatience*” (ibid. 1994: 89).

Although it certainly involves an exchange of information and listening responses between two or

more participants to construct a conversation, there are an infinite combination of elements or 'Speech Events', that also need to be considered that can be said to 'contribute to' or 'constrain' its initiation, its continuation, the character of its flow, and its ultimate conclusion. Understanding these will allow the data presented in this study to be contextualized and discussed accordingly.

Speech Events address the *what, where, who, when, why, and how* elements of information exchange and, according to Coulthard (1985: pp 44-45), include:

- ◆ **The setting:** Where the conversation takes place.
- ◆ **The participants:** Who takes part in the interaction.
- ◆ **The purpose:** The reason the interaction is taking place in the first instance.
- ◆ **The context:** Similar to the setting but probably best described as the extent of external control over the interaction and its content.
- ◆ **The key:** The tone or manner of the exchanges.
- ◆ **The message form:** How the message is conveyed.
- ◆ **The channel:** The choice of medium - spoken, written etc.

In this particular study, where the setting is classroom based, the participants students, whose context of communication is being manipulated by the teacher for the purposes of data collection, it could be argued with a great degree of validity that there will be a lack of spontaneity in the degree of interaction, and a lack of willingness of students to 'lose face' (Richards, 1980: 420) by exposing themselves to the risk of making an error in such a controlled environment with a partner whom they have only just met. Accordingly, although the interaction taking place could not be defined as 'real' conversation in the sense that it is a free and fluent exchange of ideas and opinions in a relaxed venue of the students' choosing, it is a starting point in creating an environment where students can begin to understand how interactions are structured and to use or try out the language to communicate more effectively, albeit within the constraints of the classroom setting.

The process of research in this instance has been to try to capture the initial conversational inertia of false beginner students and to see if consciousness raising activities based on my own learning experiences will have any measurable effect on students' language awareness and skills over a short period, and to examine if and why any changes are apparent.

Methodology

In the preliminary class in April 2005, I explained to the students (1st year science majors), that they would be making a recording of their conversations the following week. I informed the students at this time that they would be also be making a similar recording in the final class of the first semester in

July.

At the beginning of the second class I made pairs from individuals who were not sitting together to lessen the chance of their knowing each other, and make the task of an introductory conversation more real. Each pair were given a recording Walkman with a 5X5 minute recording tape along with instructions on loading the tape and the location of the microphone to ensure a good recording. Handouts were then distributed to each student, which gave advice on how to make the recording and make a transcription of their dialogue. I specifically asked pairs to transcribe any Japanese they used as well as any fillers and/or pauses but gave no standardized instruction as to how to write these. The topic for this initial conversation was to find out about each other.

My reasons for asking students to write their own transcripts were largely out of consideration of the time it would take for me to work through each recording individually. However, it also held the advantage of giving students an opportunity to listen to how they sounded in conversation and to physically see how their dialogue progressed over the course of the allotted recording time. Over the rest of the term I typed up the transcriptions and reviewed the recordings individually.

After the recording week, I gave instructions and handouts focusing on raising students' awareness of how to actively listen to what their partner is saying and build a conversation based on listening to replies to questions instead of moving 'off topic' with new unrelated questions. At the same time, I gave instruction on rejoinders and their function as fillers for turn taking. I also sat with pairs of students during class, listening in to their exchanges and interrupting when I felt they could have carried a conversational topic forward a little more by asking them to consider appropriate alternative 'on-topic' follow-up questions.

I based the classroom instruction on a narrow focus of using back-channel responses to information along with appropriate follow-up questions based on my own interpretation of how an exchange would flow were I to be taking part in the conversation. For the process of simplicity and to place a strong emphasis on topic development, I stuck with the formula of:

A: *Question.*

B: *Answer.*

A: Response = *rejoinder + comment + follow-up question.*

Finally, I returned typed transcripts of the April recordings to each pair with handwritten comments and sample follow-up questions where I thought they could have expanded on a topic more (an example of this is detailed below). I asked students to individually review these dialogues for the final semester

class when they were due to make their second recordings which they transcribed by themselves as before.

After reviewing the transcripts from the whole class, I decided to focus on a pair of students who seemed to have made the most progress in their conversational fluency between the two recording periods. The data from their recorded transcripts, along with an example of the intervention process and analysis of the process of changes in interactions are presented and discussed below.

Transcript from the April Recording

Below is the transcript from the April recording of two students who seemed to correspond to the most stereotypical form of false beginner interaction.

| | | | |
|----|---|----|--|
| 1 | A: Where are you from? | 11 | A: What kind of music do you like? |
| 2 | B: I'm from Tochigi. | 12 | B: I like "Bump of Chicken." Where are you from? |
| 3 | A: What's your parent's job? | 13 | A: I'm from Fukushima. |
| 4 | B: Salary man. | 14 | B: What's your parent's job? |
| 5 | A: How many sisters do you have? | 15 | A: Father is in hospital. My mother is part time. |
| 6 | B: One sister. | 16 | B: How many brothers and sisters? |
| 7 | A: How many brothers do you have? | 17 | A: I have one brother and one sister. |
| 8 | B: One brother. | 18 | B: What do you usually do in your spare time? |
| 9 | A: Do you have any hobbies? | 19 | A: I listen to music. |
| 10 | B: Yes I have. My hobby is soccer. | | |

Analysis

In the April recording, it would be fair to say that the students certainly don't lack the vocabulary or skills to communicate in English given that they are successfully exchanging information to find out about each other, as was the set task for the recording. However, despite the successful exchange of information taking place on one level, there is nothing characteristically conversational in the way they are talking. For example, there are no back-channel responses or rejoinders as they jump from question to answer, question to answer. In addition, there is also a complete lack of topic development. The whole transcript consists of 19 question and answer turns which touch on seven topics: '*hometowns*', '*parent's occupation*', '*siblings*', '*hobbies*', '*music*' and '*spare-time activities*,' but there is no point in the dialogue where one of the participants picks up on a topic and follows up on it with subsequent topic related questions. From the perspective of my teaching aims, that represents seven missed opportunities to allow an initial response to a question to develop into a topic-centered conversation through asking follow-up questions. I therefore took the original transcript and indicated places in the conversation where I felt the students could have expanded on their topic development and returned the text to the students with my comments as an awareness raising exercise.

April transcript

Awareness-raising feedback

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>A: Where are you from?</p> <p>B: I'm from Tochigi.</p> <p>A: What's your parent's job?</p> <p>B: Salary man.</p> <p>A: How many sisters do you have?</p> <p>(Do you have any brothers or sisters?)</p> <p>B: One sister.</p> <p>A: Do you have any hobbies?</p> <p>B: Yes I have. My hobby is soccer.</p> <p>A: What kind of music do you like?</p> <p>B: I like "Bump of Chicken." Where are you from?</p> <p><i>*How about you?</i></p> | <p>Really?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">— Which part?— Do your parents still live there?— Where do you live now?— How often do you go back home? <p>Oh/I see.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">— Both your parents?— Which company?— Is that in Tochigi? <p>Really? How old?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">— Is she working or a student?— Is she married?— Does she have any children?— What does her husband do?— Do you get on with each other? <p>Soccer?</p> <p>Oh really?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">— Do you play in a team?— What's your position?— How often do you play?— Who is your favourite team?— Do you often go to see a game? <p><i>How about you? What music do you like?</i></p> |
|--|---|

From the perspective of work done by Maynard (1980: 284), such question and answer exchanges are characteristic of topic development invitation by speakers who are unfamiliar with each other in that topics are developed on the basis of questions which are either refused or picked up on by the participants and carried on as a conversational theme. In this regard, having been the first time the speakers had actually met suggests this process may be occurring. In addition, there may also have been a reluctance to lose face by revealing or asking for too much personal information. There also is the fact that the students felt they had to stick to task and just ask questions to find out about each other. This may have resulted in students assuming more of an interview role where McCarthy observes that *“individuals are so intent on formulating their contributions and making them at the ‘right’ moment as determined by the activity rubric, that they pay little attention to the contribution of others, and the natural patterns of back-channel, utterance completion, etc. simply do not occur.”* (McCarthy, 1991:128).

This is not to say that back-channeling does not occur in Japanese. In fact, preliminary studies by Locastro (1987:101) reveal that foreign speakers with a degree of proficiency in Japanese actually begin to use more back-channeling than they normally would in their native language, an indication that Japanese requires just as much back-channel responses than English, if not more. One function of this is in order to let the speaker know that they still hold the floor even though there is no agreement or even understanding of the message by the listener (Schlegloff, 1982) in LoCastro,1987: 104). Therefore, with regard to teaching strategies, *“It is not a question of telling learners that speakers take turns; they know that naturally from their own language. The problem is to make sure that activities generate the natural sorts of turn-taking patterns that occur in the target language”*. (McCarthy, 1991:128). It is this pattern of more natural turn-taking that I was hoping to achieve with my present teaching approach, and this seems to have been accomplished to a certain extent if we examine the transcript procured from the second recordings in July of the same term.

| | | | |
|---|---|----|--|
| 1 | A: It has been very hot recently. | 6 | B: Oh, you are in a difficult situation. |
| 2 | B: Yes, it sure. How high is the temperature now? | 7 | A: It's can not be helped. I don't want to waste money. Even a little. |
| 3 | A: About thirty-two degree now. The Weather forecast says it will be thirty-six today. | 8 | B: By the way. Where do you want to go? |
| 4 | B: Thirty six! Really? I'm dying of heat. Can you sleep well every night? | 9 | A: I want to go Okinawa |
| 5 | A: No. Recently I have not been sleeping much at all. Especially yesterday night. I hardly slept all night with this terrible heat. | 10 | B: What do you want to do? |
| | | 11 | A: I want to watch dolphins and swim with. |
| | | 12 | B: Dolphins? Really? |
| | | 13 | A:Oh really! |

The July Recording

In contrast to the April dialogue, this exchange indicates clear phatic talk or “*phatic communication*” (Richards, 1982 in LoCastro 1987: 104) “*showing interest*” and building up to the set conversation topic, which was 'Plans for the summer vacation'. It also gives the impression of being more relaxed and friendly. The first five turns show clear anaphoric reference (referring back to previous information) to the hot weather where speaker B expands the topic through the target pattern of *rejoinder + comment + follow-up question*:

B: *Thirty six! Really? I'm dying of heat. Can you sleep well every night?* (line 4)

Speaker A then comments about her lack of sleep but also adds additional information to both inform and empathize with speaker A's plight about *dying of heat*.

A: *No. Recently I have not been sleeping much at all. Especially yesterday night. I hardly slept all night with this terrible heat.* (line 5)

Speaker B responds again with a rejoinder “*Oh*” and a follow-up comment about the partner's situation.

B: *Oh, you are in a difficult situation.* (line 6)

A: *It's can not be helped. I don't want to waste money. Even a little.* (line 7)

Then speaker A's referral to money gives B the opportunity to bring up the designated theme of the conversation (summer plans) by interjecting with ‘*By the way*’, (line 8) which is a common way of ‘getting to the point’ (*tokoro de*) in Japanese which translates almost identically from English.

B: *By the way. Where do you want to go?*

The initial change of topic might look odd at first but for the speakers it is returning to the shared information of the conversation topic they elected to talk about. So, even though the topic changes, there is still continuity with follow-up questions about what Speaker A wants to do when they go to Okinawa (line 11). The backchannel response of surprise: *Dolphins? Really?* (line 12), indicates interest and active listening to what the speaker is saying. It also gives a sense of conversational flow that was lacking in the earlier data.

Discussion

There is certainly a marked difference between the two sets of data, both in the fluency and style of the interactions, with the July transcript bearing more of the characteristics of a 'conversation' rather

than an interview type classroom exchange.

Although some influence from attending other English classes were considered as having a possible effect on the changes that were recorded, student feedback revealed that my class was the only one involving active group conversation work, whereas the other classes were either test based (such as TOEIC) or specialized reading for science majors and not communication oriented.

So with reference to what was covered in this particular class, throughout the whole term, even though there was no emphasis on learning new vocabulary items, concentrating solely on listening/response patterns seems to have been a useful strategy in helping students become aware of how they can create a framework for extended topic development through some simple consciousness raising techniques. In addition, the more varied topic selection for the July recording may also have had an influence on the characteristics of the turn-taking indicated in the transcript whereby "*The looser the restrictions on what and when people may speak, the more naturally the turn-taking emerges.*" (McCarthy, 1991: 128). However, if the results are considered from a slightly different perspective, there may be some other dynamics at work in the way speakers are constructing their topic development at a more subconscious level.

Research conducted by Maynard into topical talk failure between native speakers, found that topic changes are often employed as strategies by speakers to repair failed transactions as an "*abstract procedure for reinstating continuous talk*" and that speakers will, "*construct their conversations topically in any 'make talk' situation, such as parties, passenger terminals, on public transportation etc. and whether the conversants are newly introduced or well acquainted.*" (Maynard, 1980: 280). Indeed, McCarthy has indicated that it is this tendency for people to engage in phatic (interactional) talk, either as friendly exchanges, or as part of a process leading up to a formal transaction (i.e. the purchase of something from a newsagent or leading up to explaining a particular problem with a doctor) is what gives students most trouble in L2. However, the important finding in Maynard's study was not that 'all' speakers try to maintain conversational continuity through topic change, but that the strategies used to manage topic development by unacquainted pairs are different to those who are familiar with each other.

I had mentioned earlier that part of the reason that the speakers in the original recording lacked any conversational coherence may have been due to their lack of familiarity with each other. If this is analyzed in greater detail, a pattern begins to emerge.

According to Maynard, 'Acquainted pairs' tend to form announcements to give new information to the listener whereby "*An announcement forms the first part of an adjacency pair and provides for the conditional relevance of a second pair part: an acknowledgement, assessment or question,*" (Maynard, 1980: 284). I would equate an acknowledgement and *assessment* with a 'backchannel response' and a *question*

with a 'follow-up topic -based question', which were part of the language targets in this particular class. This would suggest that speakers who are familiar with each other, carry conversations forward based on following up on phatic talk followed by the introduction of new information as a means of topic development. Unacquainted pairs on the other hand would seem to form questions rather than give new information in topic failure repair strategies (Maynard, 1980: 283). Therefore, it may be that one reason there is such a difference between the April and July transcripts is because not only were students acquiring the target skills of back-channeling and follow-up questions, but their developing familiarity with each other was allowing a different pattern of topic development to emerge in their conversation exchanges. In this regard, according to Sachs (April 28, 1972 in Maynard, 1980: 283) "*Topic changing questions operate as topical invitations. They are built so that a recipient may produce simply an answer, or may produce an answer plus additional talk. To do the former may be to refuse the topical invitation... To do the latter, i.e. to produce more than an answer to a topic changing question, would constitute accepting the invitation.*"

With relevance to this present research it could be suggested that the question answer strategies employed by speakers who were unacquainted at the time were a way of ensuring that topic breakdown would not happen and that consequently they would not lose face or be embarrassed by a breakdown in communication. It is almost like speakers felt the need to keep talking through any means by totally unrelated questions or suffer the embarrassment of silence. Once the speakers became more familiar with each other, the pattern of topic development within their conversation changed so that there was an appropriate amount of small talk leading up to the main topic of conversation.

Therefore in conversational development, "*topic changes occurring in the conversations between unacquainted pairs get formed as 'invitations' (which may be either refused or accepted) while those between acquainted pairs get formed as claims to do topic development talk through an announcement sequence and the talk it implicates*" (Maynard, 1980: 284). In other words, unacquainted pairs will have more restricted question based conversations with the potential for expanding topics which will either be picked up on or refused, whereas familiar pairs will tend to build up a topic through small talk. The contrast between the April and July transcripts would seem to indicate that this process is in evidence.

Although the Maynard study was done with native speakers, it is worth considering that the same process may be occurring on similar levels with students as they become more familiar with each other and get used to using appropriate response strategies learned in the class.

Conclusion

It would seem that the idea of awareness raising activities on the use of back channeling and follow-up questions to pursue topics were an effective way to help students develop more conversational fluency

in that their dialogue changed from only a question and answer format to a conversational style which used more back-channel responses and phatic talk, in addition to evidence of more specific topic development. The turn-taking in the exchanges also tended to have a more fluent edge over the time of the recordings. All this was achieved with students pre-existing knowledge of English with there being no emphasis on learning any new vocabulary items. One interesting aspect of the research was the way that topic management functioned differently as the familiarity of the speakers increased. Although I had originally put this aspect of the first transcript down to a lack of knowledge of appropriate response skills in English, it may be that the speakers were also displaying features of topic development, or lack of it, as a common feature of exchanges between speakers who are unacquainted, which may be an interesting avenue of further study.

A pertinent conclusion would be to say that this research proved useful in examining the effectiveness of using the awareness raising activities such as 'back-channeling' and 'active listening' with false beginner students, and at the same time helped me to consider analysis of spoken interaction from a wider perspective than I had originally intended. As a process of progressive learning in the field of language education I would hope for nothing less.

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