THE MOTIVATIONAL POWER OF INTERNET CHAT

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ABSTRACT

Internet chat was investigated as a potential motivating learning tool in the language classroom. The purpose of this research was to examine the interaction of small groups involved in face-to-face discussions and to compare these texts to interaction that occurred in online groups. Observation and data revealed that students were generally motivated to communicate in English using Internet chat. When the groups were compared, it was found that student participation in online chat groups was more equitable and students showed a preference for chat over face-to-face conversation. Based upon these findings, we conclude here that Internet chat can be used to deliver meaningful and appropriate language tasks in the ESL/EFL classroom.

Introduction

Co-constructed conversation between interlocutors is a natural phenomenon for native speakers of a language; however, when non-native speakers must engage one another in a second language, it can be a different story. For Japanese language learners unaccustomed to interaction in spoken English, conversations in English can be quite troublesome (Brown and Levinson 1978; Varonis and Gass 1985; Porter 1986; Sacks et al. 1974). The task of speaking a foreign language can seem daunting to students due to social and cultural factors such as those mentioned by Brislin (1981: 70):
knowledge of subject matter;
language skills;
communication skills and key non-verbal behaviors;
taking advantage of opportunities and an ability to pursue one’s own interests;
ability to use traits, which demands knowledge of everyday behavior; and
ability to complete one’s task (whatever is required of the speakers).

Additionally, Japanese university students’ insufficient production skills can be tied to training provided in primary and secondary education that emphasizes quiet observation rather than active participation in the classroom (Nozaki 1993). McLean (1995) also notes that the existence of peer pressure causes Japanese students to remain inconspicuous by not displaying oral ability in the university classroom. Hence, Japanese students have a tendency to rely on prepared texts and Japanese to communicate in the EFL classroom rather than taking opportunity to use the target language (TL).

The general lack of motivation among university students is another factor that accounts for difficulties in the use of the TL (Nozaki 1993; Helgesen 1993). Such students fail to take advantage of classroom opportunities to use the TL. As a result they are unable to develop the confidence to interact with others using the TL. Any one of the above factors can dampen a learner’s willingness to participate, making conversation opportunities in the TL demotivating (see MacIntyre et al. 1998 for further discussion).

As a means to provide ample opportunities to interact in the TL, and as is often the case in Japan, due to large class sizes, groupwork and pairwork have become common practice in communicative approaches in the belief that such tasks will increase student production of the TL (Omaggio 1986). While groupwork does provide many opportunities for communication, it cannot guarantee that each member will make an equal contribution. In fact, Cohen (1994) has contended that group interaction is often negatively influenced by hierarchical group structures that naturally exist based upon each member’s characteristics and the topic of discussion. Put another way, a strong leader can take control of a group’s interaction spaces by securing turns and consequently dominate the conversation. Freiermuth (1998; 2001) and Warschauer (1996) corroborated Cohen’s
insightful work by demonstrating that these problems also occur in face-to-face conversations involving second language learners. The more outgoing and more proficient students do most of the talking in small groups, while the shy, reticent and/or less proficient students speak even less often than they would in a teacher-fronted classroom (see especially Freiermuth 1998; 2001).

In the light of this, Internet chat was investigated for its potential to both overcome the above-mentioned social and cultural barriers, and to motivate students to communicate. Internet chat can be used as a means of interaction because it shares certain qualities with conversation in that it is a synchronous medium that encourages spontaneous production, making it a comparable medium. Conversation and Internet chat also involve regular turn-taking (unlike most kinds of writing, for example) so that the discourse of Internet chat shows a remarkable resemblance to that of face-to-face conversation. Of course Internet chat requires skills such as typing, and its use is associated with anonymity and availability of lag time, aspects that will be shown to be of substantial value in its use as a pedagogical tool.

Motivation

As we are examining the motivational aspects of Internet chat, we need an operational definition of motivation. Gardner and Lambert (1959; 1972) were two of the first researchers to analyze motivation as it related to language learning and at the time divided motivation into two types: ‘integrative’ and ‘instrumental’. The former is the type of motivation associated with students who desire to identify themselves with a particular country and its culture. The latter is the type of motivation associated with students who want to use the TL (English, in this case) for a more concrete goal such as passing an entrance test or getting a promotion within a company. The average Japanese university student could be said to have ‘instrumental’ motivation up until the time he or she enters university, due to the importance of English as a subject on university entrance exams. Upon entering the university, however, without a higher task to aim for, students’ ‘instrumental’ motivation tends to wane. In contrast, the ‘integrative’ type of motivation is unlikely to apply to the majority of Japanese students who have little or no contact with English-speaking societies (Kobayashi et al. 1992).

In order for a discussion of student motivation to be meaningful to ESL/EFL pedagogy, motivation must be tied to what the teacher can
control, namely what happens in the class. Keller (1979; 1983), a cognitive psychologist, describes motivation more practically from the point of view of pedagogy. Motivation is a matter of choice, the choice of the learner to take part or not. From this point of view, the aspect of the classroom most likely to affect this motivation is the task used. The classroom question then becomes, ‘Does the task possess ample attractiveness as to exert a level of curiosity in learners as well as persuade them to choose to exert and sustain effort in order to be successful’ (cf. Iyengar and Lepper 1999; 2000).

Willingness to Communicate

This notion of choice goes hand-in-hand with the learner’s willingness to communicate (WTC). WTC means that, given the opportunity, the learner will communicate in the TL. In a Japanese college classroom, even among English majors, there are extreme variations in student WTC. Most students say they want to learn the TL but avoid exerting themselves to achieve their stated goals. Others have a fear of being embarrassed in front of their peers and opt for silence. Many who do use the TL rely on preplanned scripts, their textbooks and their first language when engaged in face-to-face conversation (MacIntyre et al. 1998).

Research Questions

In this study we look at Internet chat as a medium with the potential to motivate learners and increase their WTC. Internet chat has been used successfully in the classroom by several researchers (Kelm 1992; Chun 1994; Kern 1995); however, what makes this study distinctive is that the group of students who participated were of the same nationality, Japanese, and all were female. The following are research questions that we hoped to address:

1. Which did the students prefer for task resolution, Internet chat or face-to-face conversation?
2. What were the reasons for their preference?
3. Which mode of interaction elicited more language?
4. Did the descriptive discourse data provide any evidence indicating which was more motivating?
Method

This study took place during regularly scheduled classes at Nagoya Women’s University. The subjects were 26 first-year and 43 second-year students in the English Department of the two-year college. The first-year students were enrolled in an elective course called ‘Internet English’ while the second-year students were enrolled in another elective course called ‘Speaking’.

First- and second-year students in the English Department have a core curriculum of English skills courses: Grammar and Study Skills, Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking. The courses were developed together to provide recursive use of vocabulary and language structures across the curriculum. The aim of the curriculum is to increase students’ receptive knowledge of the language and at the same time develop their production skills.

The students had been previously evaluated using the IP TOEIC, and scores ranged from 120 to 560. The lower scores are not necessarily an accurate reflection of the students’ ability for two reasons. First, the test is not designed to discriminate between test-takers with scores of less than 220 (private communication with TOEIC). Second, the proctor of the IP tests noticed that several of the more capable students chose to sleep rather than finish the test. For a more realistic evaluation of the students’ ability, teacher evaluations were also used to divide up the groups.

The 69 students were divided into two large groups, Group A and Group B, which were further divided into smaller groups of four members. The smaller groups were formed with a mixture of first- and second-year students with differing abilities. By mixing students according to perceived proficiency, we avoided having groups exclusively consisting of students with either higher proficiencies or lower proficiencies. This was done as a means to reduce the chance that either the treatment group or the experimental group was given an advantage.

The experiment was carried out over a three-week period during regular class time. In the first week, one group did online chat while the other had face-to-face conversations. In the second week, the pattern was reversed as a means to counterbalance the task design. The face-to-face conversations took place in a lecture room with moveable desks. Four desks were arranged to face each other, and a portable tape recorder was placed in the center to record the conversation. The online chat took place in an adjacent computer room with five rows of computers. Each of the
four members of a team was assigned to a seat in a different row. Group members were not told who their partners were, and the distance between members of the same group ensured that they could not speak directly to one another during the chat session.

The online chat program used by the students in this experiment was LECS (Language Education Chat System) developed specifically for EFL education by Taoka Harada and Tomohiro Yasuda of Kanto Gakuin University. Freely available on the Internet (http://home.kanto-gakuin.ac.jp/~taoka/lecs/), this software program offers advantages that include its easy-to-use interface and the attribution of a different font color to each user. The different colored fonts make it easier to identify the contributor and follow the various threads of conversation within each chat room. Students found little difficulty in using the software and computers. In fact, all of the first-year students had used the chat software a number of times previously in class, and most of the second-year students had used it during their freshman year when they took ‘Internet English’.

In the first week, Group A participated using online chat while Group B participated using face-to-face conversation. Both groups were given the same prompt to consider. In the second week a new prompt was given to both groups; Group B chatted online while Group A conversed face-to-face conversation and a new prompt was given to both groups. After the explanations of the task, the teams had the remaining time (approximately 60 minutes) to devise solutions to the prompt’s expressed problem. In the third week a posttest survey was carried out to investigate student attitudes to the two types of interaction. The instructions, prompts and the questionnaire were bilingual, printed out in both Japanese and English, to ensure that every student understood the instructions for each phase of the experiment as well as the content of each discussion.

At the end of the experiment, the chat discourse was downloaded from LECS and saved into word processing software. The conversation data, on the other hand, were transcribed from the audiotapes. Due to the large amount of Japanese used during the conversations, the accuracy of the transcriptions was verified by a Japanese teaching assistant.

Chat and Face-to-Face Conversation Data

In this section we provide examples of both the chat data and the face-to-face conversation data for a small group, which the researchers labeled ‘YM’. The group remained together for the chat session and the face-to-face conversation. The names of the individual members are the chat
names chosen by the members themselves when they were using LECS. These names were also used for the face-to-face conversation data transcription.

A look at the chat data shows that all the students are actively involved in negotiation.

The Prompt

Discussion Topic: ‘A group of four 18-year-old American female university students will be coming to Japan in August. Your group will be their guide. Plan their trip in Japan for two weeks and include places, length of stay and daily activities’.

Discourse Selection

Chat YM (A)

Hayato, I would like to visit in Kyoto and Nara.
Emily, I want to take them to Tokyo.
Snow, I think they are good idea! What should we see there?
Yama, I would like to go Tokyo, too.
Hayato, I go to Harajilyuku.
Hayato, How about you?
Yama, I would like to go Tokyo Disney Sea.
Snow, I want to go to Hokkaido!
Emily, Which place do we take them first?
Emily, Yama, I think your idea is good!
Hayato, Me, too.>Yama
Hayato, I would like to Disney Sea.>Emily
Yama, But, I haven’t go there, yet. I want go there very much!!
Snow, I heard from my friend sea solt ice cream is delicious.
Emily, Everyone, we take only Disney Sea? With Disney Land??
Hayato, Me, too.>Yama
This is how the conversation unfolds in this chat group:

1. ‘Hayato’ and ‘Emily’ are the first to offer suggestions.
2. ‘Snow’ is amenable to both ideas and the two proceed to expand on their ideas.
3. ‘Yama’ agrees with ‘Emily’.
4. ‘Hayato’ responds to ‘Snow’ by mentioning a specific place in Tokyo that she wants to visit. She then asks others for their opinions.
5. ‘Yama’ chooses a different place, still near Tokyo.
6. However, when ‘Snow’ finally does offer a suggestion, she wants to go to a place more than an hour away from Tokyo by airplane. As a result, no one picks up on her suggestion. They center their discussion on places around Tokyo.
7. In the end, everyone agrees with ‘Yama’ that they should go to Disney Sea (a relatively new Disney amusement park next to Toyko Disneyland).

If we look at the conversation data, we see a very different picture.

The Prompt

Discussion Topic: Your group has won a 500,000 yen gift certificate in a raffle. Come up with three possible ways of spending it. Then discuss each plan in detail and decide which plan is best. Explain why it is better than the other two plans.

Conversation YM (A)

Very long silence—more than five minutes—then ‘how do you say “divide”’?—then another five minutes of silence—then Japanese)

…divide… (several times, then more whispered consultation in Japanese—then another five minutes of silence

Yama: Where do you want to go?

Snow: I’d like to go to Tokyo Disneyland and Tokyo Disney Sea.

Yama: What do you want to do?
Emily: I’d like to eat dinner.

Hayato: Divide each of our money with... We will divide each of our money

There is a considerable silence punctuated with whispered consultations in Japanese, most of which were inaudible on the audiotape. The English that is finally produced is sparse, shows only a token attempt at negotiation with one question, and unfolds in the stilted manner of a poorly written textbook dialogue. The final statement sounds more like a command than a suggestion.

Posttest Questionnaire Results

Figure 1 shows how students rated their experience during face-to-face conversation and online chat based on their responses to the posttest questionnaire handed out in the third week. Due to significant attrition of the original 69 students because of absence, only 39 students were able to complete the questionnaires.

Figure 1. Student Ratings

The most frequent choice for both chat and conversation was three or ‘average’ on a Likert-scale. What is important to note is that the numbers for ‘somewhat favorable’ and ‘somewhat unfavorable’ are noticeably different between one medium and the other. A total of 15 students rated
their face-to-face conversation experience unfavorably compared to only four who rated their online chat experience as unfavorable. 17 students rated their online chat experience as favorable compared to nine who rated their face-to-face experience as favorable.

In Figure 2 we can see which medium in this experiment was preferred by the students. A total of 31 students said that they preferred the online chat session while only eight students said that they preferred face-to-face conversation. When asked to explain what they liked and disliked about using face-to-face conversation and online chat, their reasons were remarkably similar. The following are their most common responses:

**Figure 2. Preferences**

![Preferred Medium Pie Chart]

- Ten students liked it because: ‘We could talk to students in a different year’. ‘We could talk to people we didn’t know.’ Actually, first- and second-year students tend not to mix socially, and unless a second-year student has been unable to pass all her first-year classes, she will never take classes together with freshmen in the college.
- Six students disliked it for basically the same reason that the ten students liked it—because they found it difficult to talk to strangers or people from an upperclass.
- Six students disliked it because ‘everyone ended up using Japanese’.
Online Chat

- Fourteen students liked it for the following reasons: ‘It was easy because we couldn’t see our partners’; ‘We didn’t know our partners’.
- Seven students disliked it for the reason that ‘…(i)t was difficult to come to an agreement because of people’s different ideas’.

Conclusion

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from the data. First, 31 students stated that they preferred Internet chat. We believe that this provides substantial evidence that Internet chat is a motivating tool for the classroom. Looking at other student comments (below) favoring Internet chat, we can see that it has an affective edge over face-to-face conversation:

- Seven students said that they had more time and could work at their own pace.
- Six students commented that they couldn’t see their partners and didn’t know to whom they were chatting.
- Three students mentioned that they kept communicating in the TL.
- Three students said that they felt more relaxed.

All of the above comments indicate that chat is attractive because students do not experience the pressure of face-to-face conversation. There is no need to contribute at a given time or give immediate feedback to another’s contribution, so students do not feel the kind of constant response-pressure that is characteristic of spoken conversation. The lag time that chat affords learners and which does not exist in face-to-face conversation allows them to answer at their own pace.

Another recurring theme is that of anonymity, not knowing or seeing one’s interlocutors. The contrast between chat and conversation data in relation to anonymity allows us to see how high some social barriers are in Japan and how difficult it is to bridge them face-to-face (Brown and Levinson 1978). Garton, et al. pinpoint the role that Internet chat plays in reducing social barriers:

CMC tends to underplay the social cues of participants by focusing on the content of the messages rather than on the attributes of senders and receivers. By reducing the impact of social cues, CMC supports a wider range of participants and participation (1997: 6).
There is also the question of TL use. Six students were critical of the face-to-face conversation groups because they used Japanese and three praised Internet chat because they communicated entirely in the TL. Internet chat can be an effective medium for keeping students communicating in English, perhaps more effective than face-to-face conversation. The fact that students continued to use English during the chat session and generally produced more language using it indicates that Internet chat may be considered motivational inasmuch as it seems to increase students’ WTC.

Finally, from the viewpoint of discourse analysis, the chat data for Group YM seem much closer to natural patterns of conversation than the face-to-face data reveal. Students took more turns when using Internet chat than when conversing face-to-face. Turn-taking and student TL production were also more equitable in the Internet chat session than in the face-to-face conversation. The lag time allowed students to put forward their ideas, consider others’ contributions and respond to them—in other words, Internet chat encourages the kind of student interaction that constitutes true communication.

The implication for language teachers is that Internet chat can be used as an effective way to get students interacting. Beyond this, with the aid of well-designed tasks, students should remain motivated when participating in chat interaction. This is not to say that spoken conversation is not important but to emphasize the usefulness of Internet chat to teachers who are thinking to add some new components to their ESL/EFL curriculum or to teachers who are teaching in a computer classroom and would like to incorporate some interactive tasks. With effectively designed tasks, Internet chat has the potential to get and keep students communicating in the TL.

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