Effects of Constructed Conversations on Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

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Abstract
After the development and prolonged implementation of constructed conversation performance activities in class, casual student feedback suggested that the students' willingness to communicate was increased by participation in this activity. It was decided to make a more formal and complete survey of student attitudes to gauge if the students perceived an increase in their abilities and willingness to participate. The survey confirmed that the vast majority of students perceived a rise in both ability and willingness to communicate which they attributed to participation in the constructed conversations.

Key Words: WTC, willingness to communicate, increase, university students, Japan

Introduction
Over several years, as part of their in-class activities, classes of approximately 30 college freshmen in an oral English class at a Japanese university had been engaged in a series of conversation activities that was eliciting very positive feedback. It occurred to the authors that it might be fruitful to see what affect this activity had on the students' perceived WTC. As a preface to a more thorough quantitative analysis at a later date, the authors decided to conduct a less formal survey of a more qualitative variety to get a better feel for which direction further analysis might take.
Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

Willingness to communicate was first introduced into the literature in a language context by McCrosky and Richmond (1987). Since the 90’s the concept has been quite a prevalent and active research topic in the second language learning setting. In particular, MacIntyre (1994) proposed a WTC model including factors such as perceived communicative competence and communication anxiety which contribute to WTC, and in turn, frequency of communication. MacIntyre went on to show a correlation between lower levels of perceived anxiety and higher levels of perceived competence and second language use.

In 1998, supposing that if the definitive goal of language itself is the act of communication, a bold statement ensued; “... the ultimate goal of the learning process should be to engender in language education students the willingness to seek out communicating opportunities and the willingness actually to communicate them.” (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, p. 547) The passage continues, “A program that fails to produce students who are willing to communicate to use the language is simply a failed program.” (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, p. 547) As a reference, Figure 1 is the original pictorial representation of the factors that were presumed to influence willingness to communicate.

Measuring Willingness to Communicate

The primary tool for measuring WTC to present has been a battery of questions first described and used by Gardner (1985), called the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB). There are now many versions of the test (to be touched upon later) but the basic premise is to present test subjects with a set of questions that represent attitudes about the L2, the learners’ perceived competence/confidence in the L2, and a set of communicative situations in which the subject must rate how willing they would be to choose to communicate in each given situation [typically a one to five scale from “Almost never willing” to “Almost always willing”] (MacIntyre, P., Baker, S., Clement, R., Conrod, S., 2001). Statements are made and students must choose from one to five ranging from “strongly disagree” “strongly agree” (MacIntyre et al., 2001). These AMTB test battery questions are intended to measure perceived communication competence, anxiety and willingness (Baker and MacIntyre, 2000, MacIntyre, 1994, MacIntyre et al., 2001) based on student answers.

Many researchers have made/adapted their own version of the AMTB to suit the intended needs and backgrounds of their subjects. One innovative AMTB separates inside and outside classroom WTC (MacIntyre et al., 2001). McCrosky (1992) adapted a version and did analysis on
test validity/repeatability. Matsuoka (2004) made an innovative version in English and Japanese suited for Japanese high school/university students. In another AMTB examined, Aubrey (2010) amended his AMTB to fit working professionals. The AMTB that was designed for this study can be seen in Appendix 1.

Naturally, one might reasonably question the validity of a self-reported instrument, especially one that includes predictions of future behavior. Self-reporting issues have been documented in many disciplines, but specifically in language acquisition. “Many researchers have questioned the use of self-report questionnaires in studies of L2 motivation... that they do not always elicit true responses. Problems with this type of reporting: desire to look better in one’s own eyes, self-flattery; desire to look better in the eyes of others, approval motive; Understanding is also a problem” (Hashimoto 2002, p. 35).

Despite the limitations, the alternative of putting test subjects into real and simulated communicative situations in large scale, in order to observe their communicative behavior would be prohibitive.

**Improving WTC**

Given the purported importance of WTC and how the increase of this factor is arguably the central goal for any language program, attention should be given to the choice of activities and procedures used to affect this increase. In the literature, there are numerous anecdotes of approaches to increase a student’s willingness to communicate. Among a few noteworthy examples that have been mentioned: increasing perceived competency (Hashimoto 2002); reducing language anxiety (Hashimoto 2002, Matsuoka 2004); and adjusting class size downwards (Aubrey 2010).

Aubrey (2010, 2011) described a useful list of factors that were identified as elements which could be manipulated to increase WTC, and of those, several are especially relevant to this study.

- Reduction of communication anxiety (allow time to prepare, allow students to discuss answers in groups)
- Activity preparedness (also relates to preparation time)
- Topic relevancy (relevant to student interests)
- Task difficulty
- Group cohesiveness (the degree to which there is a feeling of “oneness” among class or group members)
Effects of Constructed Conversations on Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

These factors will be discussed in a later section as they relate to the classroom activities in focus here.

The Constructed Conversation Activity

In the first semester of each academic year, the students in these classes were asked to divide themselves into groups of 2 or 3 students (the members of which they may choose) and were required to prepare a conversation every other week before class. The requirements of the conversations:

1. The first conversation was to be at least 6 lines (turns) of speaking for each person (8 lines each for some classes). After the first week, the teacher instructed students that the conversation lengths should increase by a bit each week, but no specific length was given.
2. The conversations were to be “performed” in front of the teacher, usually in the back of class for evaluation (not in front of other students).
3. The students were required to make and practice the conversations before they came to class. The pairs/groups were allowed to refer to a paper during the conversation, but they were required to remember most of the conversation.
4. The subject matter of the conversation could be freely chosen by the students.
5. The students were told at the start of the year that conversations were to be evaluated on length, fluency and creativity.

An interesting side note to point #1; while each semester a small number of students are advised when their conversations are too short, the vast majority of students really blossom with this activity. The number of lines and length of each line steadily increase, and subject matter becomes more varied and creative.

At evaluation time immediately after the students finish, positive feedback is given, often focused on the topic matter. Corrections of grammar or syntax are never given. It rarely happens, but the students are asked to redo their conversation if; the conversation is too short, the students had to read the text too much, or there were too many long pauses in the conversation.
The Measuring Instrument/Method

A bilingual AMTB questionnaire was posted to Google Forms (a web-based entry form) and students were asked to visit this website after they were finished with their final exam.

There were seven questions asking the students to rate their attitudes, improvement, and willingness to use English in a few situations. They were to respond to these statements as one of the following for each question: strongly agree [SSA], somewhat agree [SA], somewhat disagree [SD], strongly disagree [SSD]. At the end, there was also a space that asked for any open comment the students cared to add, in English or Japanese. Most students replied in Japanese. These responses were translated by one of the authors.

A copy of these questions can be seen in Appendix 1.

Results

The great majority of the responses are of a positive nature. Out of 1152 responses from 192 students, only 69 are negative and all 69 are “somewhat disagree” rather than “strongly disagree”.

The numbers of students who chose ‘somewhat disagree’ to each question are:
Q 1 = 7   Q 2 = 4   Q 3 = 17   Q 4 = 17   Q 5 = 14   Q 6 = 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SSA</td>
<td>69 (35.9%)</td>
<td>82 (42.7%)</td>
<td>45 (23.4%)</td>
<td>56 (29.2%)</td>
<td>80 (41.7%)</td>
<td>84 (43.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>116 (60.4%)</td>
<td>106 (55.2%)</td>
<td>130 (67.7%)</td>
<td>119 (62.0%)</td>
<td>98 (51.0%)</td>
<td>97 (50.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>7 (3.6%)</td>
<td>4 (2.1%)</td>
<td>17 (8.9%)</td>
<td>17 (8.9%)</td>
<td>14 (7.3%)</td>
<td>11 (5.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, almost everybody surveyed concluded that with the practice employed in the course, it had become easier to create and perform conversations, and they additionally predicted that they would be more willing to use their English in the future.

Of the small number of negative responses, all the students (seven) but one who gave more than two negative responses (3 or 4) belonged to the same department, which in the author’s opinion is known for a generally lower level of motivation in language courses. For future discourse, this department will be referred to as “department X”.

— 29 —
Effects of Constructed Conversations on Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

These six department X students with items to which they gave negative responses are:

#24 (M) 1, 3, 4, 6
#27 (F) 3, 4, 5, 6 (She wrote that she had enjoyed the course itself.)
#11 (F) 3, 4, 5
#20 (M) 3, 4, 5
#15 (M) 3, 5, 6

Also, there are eight students who gave two negative responses and five of them belong to department X. This seems consistent with the observation that department X students appear less motivated in class.

Only seven students chose 'somehow disagree' to question 1 and of these seven students, five students chose more than one negative responses.

#12 (F) 1, 6
#24 (M) see above
#32 (M) 1, 3
#179 (F) 1, 3
#192 (M) 1, 2, 3
#58 (F) and #111 (M) responded negatively only to this question.
#32 and #121 (M) stated very appreciative comments as well.

This seems to suggest that even though those five did not find creating English conversations any easier after the first term, their listening/understanding improved and they became more willing to talk to foreigners.

Only four students chose 'somehow disagree' to question #2 and of these four students, two students chose more than one negative responses.

#77 (M) 2, 3, 5, 6 (see above)
#192 (M) 1, 2, 3 (see above)
#80 (M) and #130 (F) responded negatively only to this question.

As for the latter two who were not in department X, it may have been the case they were not happy with what their group members were doing.
A summary of the Japanese (and English) comments added to the survey by students:

The strongest impression gleaned from reading the student comments was that they never used to expect English classes to be any fun. The low expectation might have contributed to the sense of improvement, indeed. Thus the greatest impact this course had on them seems to be some personal paradigm shift: the students realized that they could ‘use’ English and even have fun with it. Although they must have had some kind of conversational training in high school, to put their own ideas into English sentences was something new and although it was challenging, most of them got the hang of it with practice. This sense of ‘breakthrough’ seems to have lifted their overall motivation. Some of the students honestly admitted that they hated English at first but came to enjoy the course. Most students seem to have enjoyed the creative and active aspects of this course very much.

Conclusion/Discussion

Referring back to Aubrey (2010, 2011), we look at the constructed conversation activity and classroom management to speculate on how any changes in attitudes, motivation and behavior might come about.

- **Reduction of communication anxiety** (allow time to prepare, allow students to discuss answers in groups). The structure of the conversation activity in focus allowed the students to prepare the conversations before class in groups of 2 or 3, so there was ample opportunity for students to prepare.

- **Activity preparedness** (also relates to preparation time). Same as above.

- **Topic relevancy** (relevant to student interests). Students were allowed to choose their conversation topics freely, so one would assume that they would choose topics which held interest for them. Indeed, it was observed that most topics were about students’ daily life, activities and interests.

- **Task difficulty**. The time students were given to prepare should reduce difficulty. Also, students had some freedom to create sentence/vocabulary difficulty on their own. Last, students could practice as much as they wanted, which would make the actual in-class conversation performance easier.

- **Group cohesiveness** (the degree to which there is a feeling of “oneness” among class or group members). The classes themselves had a certain degree of cohesion as they were made up of groups of students from the same department, and these groups of students
attended a great number of classes together, and got to know each other quite well. They were also allowed to choose their group members, with which they had an even higher degree of cohesion.

Another positive feature of this activity is thought to be the feedback immediately after the conversations, which was generally positive commentary or a short discussion about the conversation topic. Students almost always walked away from the activity with a smile.

Referring to Figure 1, these authors surmise that the conversation activity as implemented likely had a positive effect on factors influencing WTC from below, on the right side of the pyramid (Communicative self-competency, L2 self-confidence and communicative competence). The next step the authors would like to take is to do a pre and post course implementation of an AMTB to make a quantitative/qualitative measure of any changes in WTC.

Figure 1. Pyramid of variables influencing WTC (MacIntyre, et. al. 1998, p. 547)
Appendix 1. Online Willingness to Communicate Survey (Goddard & Kuroswa)

Please read the statements and indicate if you: (strongly agree [SSA], somewhat agree [SA], somewhat disagree [SD], strongly disagree [SSD]).

以下の文を読み、あなたの意見（強くそう思う、ややそう思う、あまりそう思わない、全くそう思わない）を記してください。

1. By the end of the first semester, it became easier for my partner(s) and me to make conversations (put our ideas into English sentences).

前期の終わりまでには、私とパートナーにとって会話を作ること（私たちのアイディアを英文にすること）が最初の頃よりも容易になった。

2. By the end of the first semester, it became easier for our group to perform (speak) our conversations.

前期の終わりまでには、私たちのグループにとって自分たちの会話のパフォーマンスをする（セリフを言う）ことが最初の頃よりも容易になった。

3. Compared to 6 months ago, I am now more confident about expressing myself/speaking in English.

半年前に比べて、私は英語で自己表現すること／英語を話すことにもっと自信がついた。

4. Compared to 6 months ago, I am now more confident about listening to/understanding English.

半年前に比べて、私は英語を聴くこと／理解することにもっと自信がついた。

5. Compared to 6 months ago, I would now be more willing to engage in a conversation with an English-speaking person if the opportunity arose.

半年前に比べて、私は機会があれば英語を話す人と会話をするという意欲がもっと強くなった。
Effects of Constructed Conversations on Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

6. Compared to 6 months ago, I would now be more willing to use my English abilities in other ways (listening to English materials, watch English movies/TV, write in English, read English, etc.).

半年前に比べて、私は他の方法で自分の英語能力を使う（英語でさまざまなものを聴く、英語の映画／テレビを見る、英語で書く、英語を読む）という意欲がもっと強くなった。

7. Other comments on any of the above topics (in English or Japanese OK):

上の質問のどれに対してでも、何か他にコメントがあれば書いてください（英語でも日本語でもかまいません）。

References


要旨

会話構築作業がコミュニケーションの動機に与える効果

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この数年間、大学の英語の授業内で自由会話構築活動を開発し、実行している。これは1990年代から第二言語学習において広範に活用・研究されているWTC（コミュニケーション意欲）モデルという概念に基づくものである。この形態の授業に参加した学生からは、自由会話構築活動に参加することで、コミュニケーションに対する前向きな姿勢が向上したというポジティブなフィードバックが得られた。将来的には、学生自身の能力や英会話への参加の意志が変化したと感じているかどうかを確認・測定するための、より正式で完全な調査を行うことにしている。今回の調査では、授業の実施方法自体が適切であり、学生がこの形態のクラス活動を歓迎していることを確認した。実際に学生の大多数が会話構築活動によって能力と意志の双方で向上を意識したことが判明した。