An Analysis of Goals Driving the Development of English Conversation Skills among Japanese University Students

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《Abstract》

The development of English conversation skills is a learning goal within high school classrooms in Japan. Despite this, many students enter university falling short of this target and continuing to struggle to participate in simple English conversations, even after graduation. One cause of this underdevelopment may lie with the lack of communication in English conversation learning goals between the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), educational institutes and students. This paper takes a first step to develop this communication by undertaking open-ended surveys and peer-interviews with 150 first-year Japanese university students about their perceptions of the usefulness of English conversation skills for their future. Findings revealed six main categories and 24 sub-categories of responses within both surveys and peer-interviews, mainly related to the abilities to speak with foreigners, travel, succeed in study, succeed in business, and for entertainment purposes. This data can be used by MEXT, schools, universities and teachers in Japan to adapt education at the governmental, institutional and classroom-level to better match course content to student goals and

improve resultant motivation and learning.

1. Introduction

Although the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is focusing education within high schools upon improving English conversation skills (MEXT, 2009, 2013), university students tend to remain quiet and unwilling to engage within conversations when given a chance to speak in English with others (Carless, 2007, 2009; King, 2012, 2013; Stroud, 2017a). One significant gap in the system, which may be acting as a cause for this lack of development, is the uncertainty of goals within the learning. Not only what long-term goals MEXT has for improving English conversation skills among young Japanese (beyond improving language testing scores), but also what students see as the usefulness of such skills for themselves. There is a surprising lack of research and feedback exchanged between MEXT, universities and students, as to what these goals are. This paper takes a first step to develop this dialogue by providing feedback from students about their views on the ways in which English conversation skills may help them in the future.

Additionally, feedback about learning collected by a teacher from students via surveys and interviews can often be affected by issues with reliability, such as *social desirability bias* (Dörnyei, 2003, p. 12) and/or *the interviewer effect* (Denscombe, 2014, p. 189). This paper addresses this by collecting data with two less 'face-threatening' methods (surveys away from the teacher's view and peer-interviews performed by students) in the hope of eliciting more detailed and honest self-reported data from students. This is intended to provide MEXT, universities and teachers in Japan with

valuable feedback about how students truly perceive English conversation skills to be useful for their future, which can then be used to make any necessary changes to align the education with those goals to improve motivation and the learning.

2. Background

2.1. Issues with English conversation skills among Japanese students

MEXT propose that upon leaving high school Japanese students should be capable of holding conversations in English on topics related to daily life (MEXT, 2009, 2013). This ambition is also reflected in the national testing of speaking skills done within interview-settings (such as with TOEIC, TOEFL and IELTS speaking tests) which are adopted as a measure of English proficiency in and out of educational institutes. With the Olympic Games coming to Japan in 2020, the ability of young Japanese to openly conversate with those visiting the country is an additional goal (MEXT, 2013) which further advocates the need to help students improve their English conversation skills.

Research into factors preventing Japanese students from engaging in conversations and developing their ability to do so have been plentiful (see Stroud, 2017a). Factors which are commonly identified as causes of silence and a lack of learning within communication tasks include shyness due to culturally pre-set expectation of performance (Cheng, 2000; Funshino, 2010; Harumi, 2010; Littlewood, 1999), a lack of motivational strategies by instructors (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007; Dörnyei, 2001; Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008; Stroud, 2013a) and non-engaging task design (Stroud, 2013b, 2013c; Trang & Baldauf, 2007; Willis & Willis, 2007). Despite such

research and efforts to improve learning, the reality is that many students in Japan enter university with a limited ability to conversate in English and often remain silent when presented with opportunities to do so (King, 2012, 2013).

2.2. Communication of goals behind the learning

An important approach to addressing the problem of non-participation and lack of improvement in classroom conversations may be the sharing of learning goals related to English conversation skills between the 'top' (MEXT), 'middle' (schools and universities) and 'bottom' (students themselves) of the people involved. Firstly, the information from MEXT to educational institutes, and then students, about the *exact* goals of learning English conversation skills is not clear. Reports state that the goals are to improve the ability to conversate in English with others, and to pass speaking tests (MEXT, 2013), but do not explain *why* this is important. If students are to be motivated and become as engaged as possible within the learning, they must have goals which are clear and connected to how they will use it in the future (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 29; Klem & Connell, 2004; Maehr, 1984). Recent research has shown that when goals are clear for students, they are more likely to perform better over time and get better at the tasks they are given (Gardner, Diesen, Hogg & Huerta, 2016; Stroud, 2017b; Vohs & Baumeister, 2016). This can be further supported by teachers introducing English conversation goals, related to the long-term goals of MEXT, which are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound, commonly known as 'SMART' goals (Moskowitz & Grant, 2009), at the classroom-task-level. Tasks which focus specifically on the situations and language use which is intended (presumably situations such as speaking with and helping foreigners in Japan or using English in

business for example) would improve motivation and learning, but such clarity of focus first needs to come from the 'top'.

Secondly, feedback from the 'bottom' (students themselves) on what is perceived to be the usefulness of English conversation skills in the future would be of great value for the 'middle' (institutes) and 'top' (MEXT). This is the focus of this paper, which intends to initiate a clearer line of communication from students in this area of learning. A needs analysis is a common approach recommended for tailoring course content towards learners' needs and motivation (Long, 2005; Long & Crookes, 1992; Long & Norris, 2004) and the data collected within such an analysis could also be used as feedback for educational institutes and the government. For MEXT, such feedback can reveal how well students really understand where the learning is supposed to be taking them or not. If they report usefulness of English conversation skills in the same way that MEXT would, then they can be assumed to have a clear understanding of the learning. However, such feedback from the 'bottom' to 'top' appears to be lacking. For institutes (high schools and universities), such feedback from students would help to design and create an effective balance of courses related to English communication skills. By understanding what situations students see as most useful to use English conversation skills in (such as in business or when travelling for example), courses can be created to focus on those situations, and students are more likely to become engaged in the learning.

2.3. Reliable data collection from students

In addition to the discussion above about creating a more productive learning environment and collecting feedback from students, it is also important that the feedback collected is as reliable as possible. If responses

from students are detailed and honest, the changes which may be made to learning to help them improve their conversation skills might not be appropriately matched to what they need. The most commonly used approaches to directly collecting self-reported data from students are surveys and interviews which will now be discussed.

In terms of survey data, several factors can affect reliability. If students are asked to complete surveys in the presence of the teacher, they are more likely to exhibit *social desirability bias* (Dörnyei, 2003, p. 12) by answering the questions as they believe the teacher (or other students around them) want them to. This may be a common problem for surveys in Japanese universities, which are often administered and observed by teachers within class time to ensure that students give feedback. However, this type of feedback would not be useful for English conversation skills learning if, for example, students reported saying tests were the main use for it, if they actually believed something else. To counter this, it is important that students undertake surveys away from the teacher with little pressure on them for what or how much they write. This is addressed by the surveys in the study and explained more in the methods section.

For interviews, social desirability bias can cause problems with reliability in a similar way discussed above for surveys. In addition to this, the *interviewer effect* (Denscombe, 2014, p. 189) can play a huge role in students giving brief, unclear and even untrue responses. The person holding the interview can have a huge impact on the responses giving, depending on the relationship between them and the interviewee. A teacher who is directly interviewing students about their learning is less likely to get responses which are open and honest, than an interviewer who has a less 'threatening' relationship with the student. Several factors separate these two people in the interview in this commonly adopted setting in research

with Japanese students studying English. These include the power-relationship (teacher and student), age differences, and cultural differences (for non-Japanese teachers). One solution to this is undertaking peer-interviews. If students can be trained to build rapport with and interview other students in a more 'neutral' environment, the interviewer effect will be much less of an issue. Such interviewing from inside a community have been shown to produce more fruitful data (Briggs, 1986; Goodson & Phillimore, 2010, 2012; Mann, 2011; Watson 2009) and is adopted as an approach to help gain more reliable data within the study.

3. Method

3.1. Research question

The study within this paper focuses on the following research question:

How do first-year university students in Japan see English conversation skills as useful for their future?

3.2. Design

Students undertook either an open-ended survey or open-ended peer-interview after the second class within the first semester of an English communication course. All questions and responses were given in the first language of the students (Japanese). Interviewees were selected from volunteers to undertake interviews after the class were finished, and all the other students undertook the surveys. Both approaches asked the question "Why do you think that improving your English conversation skills would be useful in your future?" Responses were open-ended and without a time

limit. Students generally took around 15-20 minutes to complete either surveys or interviews.

Surveys were completed using computers in an empty classroom, without the presence of the teacher. Students were free to write as much information as they wished to, and data remained anonymous. The teacher could not see when the students left the classroom and did not question them about their responses. This set up was used with the intent of creating a relaxed environment which may encourage more detailed and honest responses from students (which the teacher may not expect to receive directly from students).

Interviews were undertaken by two Japanese first-year students in the university, who were fluent in both English and Japanese. They were trained several times on how to undertake open and fruitful interviews (mainly focused on building rapport, effective body language, using expansion questions to elicit detailed responses, and interview note-taking skills) and were paid for training time, the interviews and follow-up meetings with the researcher. The interviews were designed to match a *community research* style of data collection (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010, 2012), where all data is collected by someone from within the same 'community' as the interviewee (unlike a teacher, who is different in terms of authority, age and sometimes culture from their students). The peer-interviewers recorded each interview and took brief notes during them. They then reviewed each recording again and transcribed the interviews in Japanese before translating them into English. As a final step, they reviewed the data with the researcher again on another occasion to check the interpretation of the responses given.

3.3. Participants

150 students (101 male and 49 female) studying within their first year at a Japanese university in Kansai took part in the study. The majors of the students were unrelated to language studies (Science and Technology focused) and they were all participating in a 15-week English communication course within one of five different classes (approximately 30 students in each class). Each student reported having continuously undertaking English classes at school from when they entered elementary school until they graduated from senior high school. Language proficiency scores were scarce, with an average TOEIC listening test score of 402 (Elementary plus level) from 52 of the students being the only way to determine their level at the start of the study.

3.4. Data analysis

After the responses from surveys and interviews were collected they were translated into English. For surveys, this was done by the researcher (non-Japanese) and difficulties in interpretations were checked with another teacher at the university (Japanese). For interviews, translations were performed by the interviewers (two students fluent in both English and Japanese) and checked together with the researcher. Once all the data was prepared in English, a Thematic Analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was taken by the researcher to interpret it. Firstly, the responses were read several times to gain an overall understanding of the data before beginning to categorize it. After that, a list of main points representing the overall reported usefulness of English conversation skills was created after reading the data several times again. Following this, a coding system was created to help categorize each response under different themes. Then,

each response was assigned to one or more of these codes and the number of responses under each theme counted. Finally, the data was reviewed again to look for patterns within responses, merge similar points and create a table (Table 1 in the next section) summarizing the overall responses within surveys and interviews (and a combined total for both).

4. Results

Table 1 summarizes the different ways in which the students reported how English conversation skills would be useful for them via the surveys and interviews. Four key findings were clear in the data. Firstly, the analysis revealed six very different categories of usefulness for English conversation skills and a total of 24 sub-categories. Although students were free to offer as many ways as they wished for how English may be useful, the data revealed diverse categories amongst the students.

Table 1. Summary of reported usefulness of English conversation skills by students

Category	Sub-category	Percentage of responses		
		Surveys (N=132)	Interviews (N=18)	TOTAL (N=150)
Interaction with foreigners	TOTAL	33.34	38.89	34.00
	Able to have conversations with foreigners	26.52	33.33	27.33
	Able to speak in Japanese to foreigners	0.76	0.00	0.67
	Make foreign friends	3.79	5.56	4.00
	Help lost foreigners in Japan	2.27	0.00	2.00
Travel	TOTAL	28.79	11.11	26.67
	Able to use English in travel situations	27.27	11.11	25.33
	Able to live abroad	1.52	0.00	1.33
Expressing oneself clearly	TOTAL	19.69	0.00	17.33
	Make oneself clear in a conversation	17.42	0.00	15.33
	Speak fluently in conversations	0.76	0.00	0.67
	Use English in conversations without translating	1.52	0.00	1.33

	TOTAL	12.12	44.45	16.00
	Pass speaking tests (TOEIC, etc)	3.79	5.56	4.00
	Study abroad	3.79	11.11	4.67
Study	Use English related to my major	0.76	5.56	1.33
	Able to attend English conferences	1.52	5.56	2.00
	Able to research in English	0.76	16.67	2.67
	Able to read published papers	1.52	0.00	1.33
	TOTAL	8.34	5.56	8.00
	Work with foreign people	1.52	0.00	1.33
Business	Have strong Business English	3.79	5.56	4.00
	Can use English to get a job	1.52	0.00	1.33
	Use English at work	0.76	0.00	0.67
	Negotiate in English within business	0.76	0.00	0.67
	TOTAL	6.82	0.00	6.00
	Watch movies in English	3.03	0.00	2.67
Entertainment	Read books in English	2.27	0.00	2.00
	Understand English news	0.76	0.00	0.67
	Listen to music in English	0.76	0.00	0.67

Secondly, the three most commonly mentioned categories (within both surveys and interviews) were 'interaction with foreigners' (34.00%), 'travel' (26.67%), and 'expressing oneself clearly' (17.33%). These demonstrated a belief among the students that English conversation skills would mainly be useful for communicating well with English-speaking foreigners by being able to express what they want to say well in English.

Thirdly, categories related to academia and employment were mentioned less often than the three categories discussed above. The fact that students mentioned 'study' (16.00%) and 'business' (8.00%) less often was a surprising finding within the data, considering the probable intent of English conversation courses to improve these opportunities for students in Japan. The sub-categories also showed some surprising data, with only 4% of students mentioned passing speaking tests and only 1.33% of students mentioned getting a job as ways in which developing English conversation skills would be useful for them.

Finally, the peer-interviews yielded different responses from students

than the open-ended surveys. One main difference was that 'expressing oneself clearly' was not reported by any of the 18 interviewees, but by 19.69 percent of the students who completed the survey. Another large difference was that 'study' was mentioned by 44.45 percent of the interviewees, but by only 12.12 percent of students within surveys. The potential significance of these differences in data for the two data collection methods, as well as the other findings discussed above, will be explained further in the next section.

5. Discussion and implications

The implications of the findings above will now be discussed with regards to different groups of people. Firstly, MEXT has the chance to now look at the data within the study to see whether the student perceptions of the usefulness of learning to conversate in English matches their own expectations or not. On reflection of this feedback, judgement of whether students understand *why* they are being asked to improve their ability conversate in English can be made. Although the data is unclear about what the longer-term goals of the learning is for students beyond language testing (see MEXT, 2009, 2013), this study has opened up an important channel of bottom-to-top communication between students and MEXT. Such clarity of goals for conversation skills would be expected to improve motivation and performance by students across time (Gardner, Diesen, Hogg & Huerta, 2016; Stroud, 2017b; Vohs & Baumeister, 2016). For instance, if MEXT wishes for students in Japanese universities to be more focused on becoming better at learning to conversate in English for business purposes (which was only mentioned as a useful point by 8% of students in the study), then clearer goals should be set for this purpose

within the education system.

Secondly, schools and universities in Japan can use the data in this study to better select, design and balance English communication courses available to students. The responses from students about the usefulness of English conversation skills were very diverse, including conversating with foreigners in Japan, travelling, studying, getting a job and for entertainment purposes. By having courses available to match all, or at least some, of these focuses for conversations, schools and universities are more likely to give students the chance to focus on using English in a way which matches their longer-term goals and which motivates them more to improve (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 29).

Thirdly, teachers of English communication classes in Japan can use a similar approach to the one taken in this study to run a needs analysis for their students before starting English communication courses. By asking students how they think English conversation will be useful in the future, they can discover how to motivate individual students within classes. The diverse responses shown within the surveys and interviews in Table 1 are a good example of how a large group of university students may respond within such an analysis and how such surveys and interviews can provide teachers with important information for designing course content. By matching classwork undertaken to personal long-term goals of the students, teachers can expect students to become more motivated and engaged within that work (Klem & Connell, 2004; Maehr, 1984). For example, the data in Table 1 suggests that the 150 students in this study should be provided with tasks focused on interacting with foreigners, travelling, expressing opinions with others, passing national speaking tests, business English and entertainment. Of course, this is likely to be too much for a single language course but matching the results from a needs analysis

to the course content, or at least offering a choice of tasks to students, is a better way to motivate them (Long, 2005; Long & Crookes, 1992; Long & Norris, 2004). In addition, using task goals within the learning to clearly match the longer-term goals of students is likely to further improve learning (such as the use of 'SMART' goals by Moskowitz & Grant, 2009). One example of this which would be relevant for the students in the study would be including goals for classroom English conversations within pairs or groups (see Stroud, 2017b). By having students focus on specific parts of conversations during performance (such as asking each other questions or giving opinions) they would be expected to improve at those skills over time.

Finally, researchers (or those who wish to collect feedback from Japanese university students) can see how the use of the open-ended peer-interviews resulted in differences in data collected compared to open-ended surveys. Although the reasons for the differences between the findings for the two approaches are difficult to conclude, the main reason may have been the rapport created between the interviewer and interviewee. The use of peer-interviews is likely to have gathered more detailed and honest responses than surveys, due to there being less impact on reliability from factors such as *social desirability bias* (Dörnyei, 2003, p. 12) and *the interviewer effect* (Denscombe, 2014, p. 189), as well as the eliciting of responses from interviewers helping expand answers more. Peer-interview data collection offers huge potential for studies with Japanese students, as it is believed to produce more reliable data from within the 'community' (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010, 2012). By reducing factors such as the interviewer effect and cultural hierarchical issues (between a teacher and student in Japanese culture) the understanding of student perceptions for MEXT, educational institutes and teachers can be improved.

6. Conclusions

This paper has provided both original and useful data about the perceived usefulness of English conversation skills among Japanese university students. The use of surveys away from the 'eyes' of a teacher, and peer-interviews with students in the same 'community' as one another, were deemed to be effective ways for collecting reliable data. Responses were detailed, avoiding potential issues which often occur within data collection directly by a teacher, such as *social desirability bias* and/or *the interviewer effect*. Both approaches are recommended for future use when collecting self-reported data from Japanese students.

The main findings within the data were that students felt that English conversation skills would be most helpful for talking with foreigners, when travelling, for expressing oneself well in English conversations, and for study purposes. This information can help MEXT, universities and teachers in Japan better understand what motivation and long-term goals students may have upon entering university, as well as help them better tailor the learning towards aiding students to reach those goals. In addition, the data may have revealed gaps in the understanding by students as to what the learning of English is intended to result in. For instance, business-related uses were less frequently mentioned than other factors by the students and could be addressed/promoted more within the education system if they are an important long-term goal. The findings have shown how a simple needs analysis style survey can help clarify the direction of the learning which is expected to result in better motivation and attainment of goals for both MEXT and students themselves.

7. Limitations

The study had three main limitations in terms of data collection and analysis. First, the surveys and interviews were only carried out within a single university. Although the data is useful for MEXT, universities, high schools and teachers within Japan, studies focused on similar data collection within other universities would help support the findings in this study. Second, the interview responses were often dependent on the skills of the student interviewers. Training was provided to the students about how to elicit responses in a relaxed environment but could be further improved with additional training within future studies. Finally, the analysis of the responses given by students was limited to the interpretations of the main researcher, interviewers and Japanese teacher (who helped check survey responses). The Thematic Analysis approach used to determine categories of responses provided a good overview of the student responses but relied only on the interpretations of the main researcher. Future research in the same area could help confirm the main findings in the study within other universities in Japan.

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