Optimizing learning opportunities and learner autonomy through conversational interaction in the classroom

Miki　Watanabe

ABSTRACT

Interaction among students in the second language-learning classroom plays a crucial role in optimizing their learning environment.　The purpose of this study was to explore strategies by which students' interaction in the classroom could be increased, so as to effect an optimal learning environment.　The classroom strategies implemented in this study aimed to keep all students engaged, to provide sufficient learning opportunities, to reduce learning anxiety, and to develop confidence.　An additional goal was for participants to achieve a degree of learner autonomy by the end of the course.　A total of 53 participants from three different English as foreign language classes were required to complete a questionnaire during their first lesson.　The questionnaire gathered information on their needs and beliefs around learning English.　Participants then completed a short conversation activity at every lesson throughout the course.　A second questionnaire was used to collect students' comments and to evaluate their progress at the end of the course.　Participants exhibited a range of positive changes attributable to their experience with the conversational activities.　The findings of this study reveal how interaction among learners can be promoted through conversational activities, leading to positive change in students' perception of English language learning.

INTRODUCTION

Interaction　among　learners　in　the　second language (L2) classroom has been found to affect learners' motivation and degree of autonomous learning.　Motivation is crucial in learners' autonomous learning (Benson, 2007) and is a concept that may be studied from several perspectives (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009).　In developing the framework of the *L2 Motivational Self System*, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) pointed out the role of ongoing situated processes in a social environment in ensuring day-to-day learner motivation (cf.　also Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).　In a supportive classroom, students feel comfortable taking risks, knowing they will not be embarrassed or criticized if they make a mistake.　Furthermore, "students in cooperative environments have more positive attitudes towards learning and develop higher self-esteem and self-confidence than in other classroom structures" (Dörnyei, 2001, p.100).　Such cooperative classroom environments come about when interaction among students is encouraged.

Further support for interaction forming a key element of an effective learning environment is offered by Ushioda (2011), who points out the importance of creating an environment in which learners' personal voices and identities are engaged in their L2 interactions in the classroom.　Grass and Mackey (2006) also claim that students learn an L2 optimally from interaction with each other.　Students develop their L2 by using both the input and the output in such interactions.　Specifically, Grass and Mackey (2006) characterize three components of classroom interaction, namely negotiation, feedback, and recasts.　During interaction, students negotiate meaning and receive feedback; these activities draw

attention to linguistic problems and present oppor-tunities to recast utterances in the target language. Such experiences help the students to learn the L2 (Grass & Mackey, 2006).

Despite the evidence that interaction is known to be an important factor for successful L2 learning, many English as an L2 (ESL) and English as foreign language (EFL) students have limited opportunities to use their L2 in social contexts. Furthermore, L2 learners have been found to report negative feelings toward the L2 – an earlier survey among my students revealed that 68% had such negative feelings toward English. One possible factor in such negative feel-ings is student anxiety, which has been found to be one of the main factors undermining learner involvement and motivation. L2 learning effective-ness, as well as L2 motivation and involvement, will be highest in a psychologically safe classroom climate, in which students are encouraged to express their opinions and feel protected from ridicule and embarrassment (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 110). Such findings suggest that L2 teachers should aim for a generally more relaxed classroom atmosphere (Nunan, 1991), in which interaction is encouraged and learner anxiety is reduced. As mentioned by Allwright and Bailey (1991, p. 20), such a relaxed classroom atmosphere makes students more willing to speak the L2 in public.

In an effort to create an optimally effective L2 classroom, I aim to increase learners' interac-tion and learning opportunities by giving them a short conversation activity (SCA) every day. The purpose of the daily SCA is to provide opportunities for students to practice using the language and to reflect on their language use and language learning. Such opportunities are particularly necessary for my students as EFL learners (Richards, 2006). The expectation was that the regular use of SCAs over a 30-week EFL course would lead to reduced learning difficulties and learner anxiety, as well as greater learner autonomy.

This paper focuses on three research questions :

1. Does the regular use of SCAs aid learners' interaction in the classroom ?
2. Does the regular use of SCAs lead to reduced negative feelings toward learning English and reduced learner anxiety ?
3. Does the regular use of SCAs promote autonomous learning ?

METHOD

The participants were 53 EFL students from three different classes of a Basic English course, which meets three times per week and focuses on basic grammar and vocabulary. The English proficiency of the participants ranged from level A to level C, and all were first year grade students. Participants completed a questionnaire during their first lesson in week 1 of the course (April). The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale by which participants could indicate their level of agreement with each given statement. Example statements from the questionnaire are given in fig. 1, and show that the purpose of the questions was to gather information about the students' opinions around learning English as an L2. On the basis of the data collected from this questionnaire, I decided to include a 15-minute SCA at the beginning of every lesson. For each SCA, a model conversation was presented on the board and I discussed the model before the students practiced it. In each conversation, each student began by playing Role A or Role B, and later the students switched roles. In the second phase of the SCA, students changed their opinions, ideas, and target sentences in order to expand the conversation. Such SCAs were continued throughout the course, with the conversational pairs changing in every lesson in order to allow students to communicate with as much variety as possible. The content of each conversation focused on a review of the previous lesson.

In order to investigate how learners' L2 needs and opinions changed throughout the course, a second questionnaire was completed at the end of the course in week 30 (January). This second questionnaire also repeated the same 5-point Likert scale and included questions requiring qualitative written statements to investigate the effectiveness of the SCAs in increasing L2 learning opportunities and promoting learner autonomy.

A : Strongly Agree.

B : Agree.

C : Neither Agree nor Disagree.

D : Disagree.

E : Strongly Disagree.

Q1 : I have trouble with learning English and have negative feelings toward English.

     A   B   C   D   E

Q2 : It is necessary to speak English with correct pronunciation.

     A   B   C   D   E

Q3 : Using English is fun even if I make some mistakes.

     A   B   C   D   E

Figure 1. Example questions about students' L2 needs and opinions

RESULTS

With regard to research question 1, the data from the second questionnaire show that more than 95% of participants indicated that interaction in the classroom was promoted by the use of SCAs (see fig. 2.1). Furthermore, as is clear from fig. 2.2, working in pairs in the SCAs was seen to create a relaxed environment that enabled students to speak English. The qualitative statements of some students revealed that the SCAs helped them to participate in the lesson naturally and actively. Furthermore, the SCAs were reported to have influenced students' relationships and communication beyond the classroom. This finding is supported by statements like, "I could talk to many students through the conversation activity because I needed to talk to different people every time. It gave me opportunities to make more friends," and "I remember I was very nervous when I first came into the classroom. I was not sure if I could get into the group and continue three times a week lessons. But it was not difficult to know new people because the conversation activity naturally made us friends. I soon started eating lunch with them even outside the classroom."

Regarding research question 2, the data show that participants' negative feelings and opinions toward learning English had changed by the end of the course. In week 1, 45% of participants
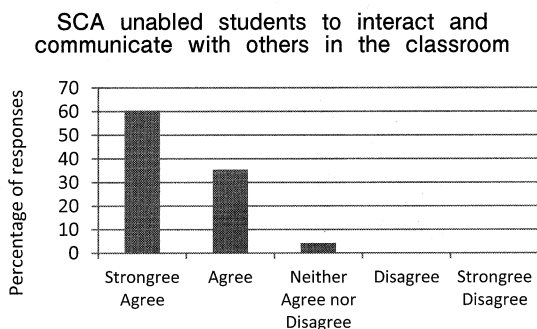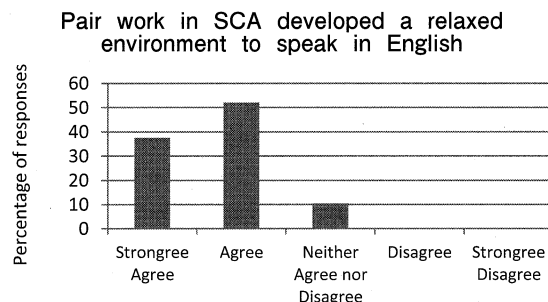

Figure 2.1 SCA and interaction

Figure 2.2 SCA and a relaxed environment
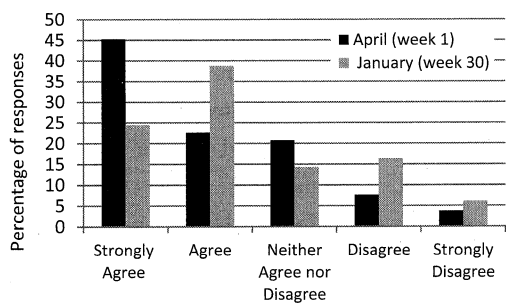
I have negative feelings toward English

Figure 3.1 Negative feelings toward English

indicated strong agreement with the statement "I have negative feelings toward English" (see fig. 3.1). In week 30, more than 20% of these participants showed less negative feelings toward English. One student commented, "At the beginning of the course, I thought grammar was complicated and couldn't pronounce appropriately, but I developed confidence through conversation activities day by day." Another student pointed out how everyday conversation aids learning motivation: "I have totally changed my perspective of learning English. I have always disliked English since junior high school days, but now I started thinking that I would be able to speak English little by little if I continue using English every day." The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine whether students' negative feelings, anxiety, and difficulties with learning English were reduced after the course with SCA. In this regard, it is important to note that more than 60% of participants in week 30 still agreed that they had difficulties with English and did not like English.

The reasons participants reported for having difficulties with learning English and not liking English are indicated in fig. 3.2. The total number of indications across difficult aspects decreased from 120 in week 1 to 89 in week 30, reflecting decreases in all linguistic aspects, namely grammar, vocabulary, listening, and pronunciation. Only one aspect, namely lack of use, received more responses

in week 30 than in week 1, possibly indicating that students had begun to place more importance on using English.

Which aspects make you dislike English ? (multiple answers allowed)	Numbers of students	Numbers of students
	Week 1	Week 30
grammar	38	31
vocabulary	32	24
listening	25	14
pronunciation	15	8
lack of use	6	10
others	4	2
Total	**120**	**89**

Figure 3.2 Negative aspects related to English

The data related to the third research question, as to the promotion of autonomous learning by the end of the course, suggest an increase in participants' motivation to find solutions to their problems with English and to improve their English (see fig. 4.1). In week 1, only 23% of participants indicated strong agreement with the statement "I'd like to find out my English problems and make improvements," whereas 41% indicated strong agreement in week 30, and more than 85% either strongly agreed or agreed. One student wrote, "I understand how much fun learning English is after this 30-week course. I want to improve my speaking skills further." Another student related a future aim : "I will make an effort to continue using English in the second year, too."

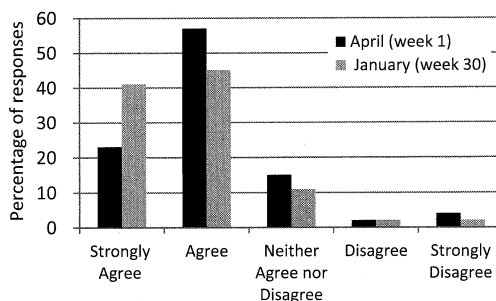## I'd like to find out my English problems and make improvements

Figure 4.1 Desire to improve their English

Fig. 4.2 presents data on participants' desire to be praised for their English by friends, teachers, or family members. Only 25% strongly agreed with the statement in week 1, as opposed to 43% in week 30, whereby participants indicated that being praised is important to them. Note that in week 30, more than 75% either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. The data in fig. 4.3 are of interest in this regard, and suggest that participants in week 30 desire praise mainly for their attitude, motivation, and maturity of opinion, rather than for linguistic or academic aspects.
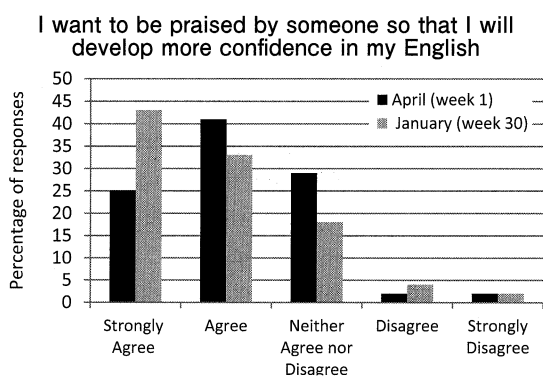
I want to be praised by someone so that I will develop more confidence in my English

Figure 4.2 The importance of being praised

For which aspects do you want to be praised by your teacher, family, or friends when you use English ? (multiple answers allowed)	Numbers of students	Numbers of students
	Week 1	Week 30
Good pronunciation	23	18
Easy to understand	28	20
Correct grammar	11	16
Motivation	11	33
Eye contact	6	9
Smiling when you speak English	4	7
Mature opinion	13	36
Friendly and helpful	2	5
Clearly audible	20	18
Total	**118**	**162**

Figure 4.3 Aspects for which participants desire praise

DISCUSSION

Does the regular use of SCAs aid learners' interaction in the classroom ?

The results suggest that SCAs are highly effective tools enabling learners to interact closely and constantly with others both inside and outside the classroom. Students were stimulated by their conversational partners and thereby had more successful learning opportunities. This relates to a statement by DeKeyser (2007), that practicing communication in interaction promotes oral language development in L2 learners. As pointed out by Bradford-Watts (2011), knowledge is best acquired through negotiation with others, and the present findings suggest that interactions become progressively expanded when SCAs are repeatedly integrated into classroom activities. Even though students were following given conversation models presented on the board, they openly discussed their opinions, shared ideas, and often laughed together. This natural conversational process was meaningful in itself, and appeared to promote the participants' learning. Indeed, as pointed out by Allwright and Bailey (1991, p.20), "what happens in the classroom, is crucial to language learning because what happens determines what learning opportunities learners get." The findings strongly suggest that carefully prepared conversational activities can increase interaction among learners in the classroom, at the same time developing a cooperative environment. Dörnyei (2001) suggests that the cooperation among L2 learners is promoted by tasks that require them to work together toward a common goal. Such a cooperative environment, in turn, leads to further interaction. A positive and active classroom atmosphere, with maximal interaction among students, can raise their interest in learning, as well as stimulating their motivation and potential for learning (Hongmei, Wang-zi, and Ping, 2010). As Lantolf (2000) points out, classroom interactions can be a key

site for the co-construction of knowledge and the enhancement of students' chances for success.

Does the regular use of SCAs lead to reduced negative feelings toward learning English and reduced learner anxiety ?

The findings suggest that participants' aversion to learning English was reduced through the use of SCAs. As Young (1999) suggests, negative emotional reactions are often aroused when learning or using an L2. Negative feelings and anxiety are therefore to be expected in ESL and EFL classrooms. However, teachers can consciously reduce students' negative feelings and anxiety so that they do not inhibit students' achievement (Duxbury & Tsai, 2010). The qualitative data in this study suggest the SCAs helped learners to change their perspectives on learning English, reducing their negative feelings and also boosting their confidence. The decrease in linguistic aspects noted as negative (grammar, vocabulary, listening, and pronunciation) appears to suggest that participants overcame some of their linguistic difficulties during the course. With regard to negative feelings toward English, while many students showed a reduction in such negative feelings, it is noteworthy that about 60% still experienced difficulties or indicated they did not like English even at the end of the course. Despite this, students clearly developed their interaction skills and learned English in a relaxed environment that is conducive to effective L2 learning. It may, therefore, be concluded that developing interaction skills was not sufficient to reduce negative feelings toward learning English. Possibly, learners require further consolidation of their successful English learning, via direct support, teachers' praise, or encouragement from other students. In this regard, Duxbury and Tsai (2010, p.12) state that, "Cooperative learning does not have an ameliorating effect on foreign language anxiety." Further research may indicate how best to reduce learners' negative

feelings and guide them to develop confidence in their L2 learning.

Does the regular use of SCAs promote autonomous learning ?

The increase in participants' agreement that they wanted to discover their problems with English and make improvements suggests that they were more strongly motivated in week 30 than in week 1. As noted by some students in their comments, they came to realize that learning English could be fun, and they wanted to make an effort to continue learning. As such, the SCAs appear to have been successful in developing classroom interactions that promoted autonomous learning. The motivation to be an autonomous L2 learner may be associated with the participants' engagement in valued enterprises and their desire to belong to multiple communities of practice – what Sade (2011, p.53) calls "motivations as belonging."

The finding that participants desired to be praised for their motivation and opinion (see fig. 4.3) suggests that they felt they had made an effort and had gained confidence in their attitudes. The SCAs in this study required participants to change their attitudes during the conversation, and thus promoted autonomous learning. As Little, Ridley, and Ushioda (2002, p.15) state regarding the development of learner autonomy in the classroom, "Learners often find it difficult to be responsible for their own learning, and from time to time they are bound to make wrong choices. But the longer they are required to practice that responsibility, the greater their sense of self-fulfillment is likely to be." These authors also emphasize the importance of the support and encouragement students are given by other people, which successfully brings about interaction between learners' "school knowledge" and their "action knowledge."

The notion of autonomous learning remains difficult to define, as it constantly changes and expands

as one's proficiency in the subject develops (Little, Ridley, & Ushioda, 2002). As Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008, p. 158) state, "language learning is not about learning and manipulating abstract symbols, but is enacted in real-life experiences, such as when two or more interlocutors co-adapt during an interaction." Within the scope of the present study, however, it was significant that repeated conversation activities went some way toward developing students' motivation and autonomous learning. Although learning motivation varies over time during the L2 acquisition process, autonomous learners can take advantage of every linguistic opportunity in their environment and thereby actively engage in L2 social practices. Moreover, autonomous learners can reflect on their learning and optimize the effectiveness of their learning strategies (Paiva, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study offer some conclusions regarding the creation of an optimally effective L2 learning environment. First, it is clear that carefully designed SCAs are effective in encouraging learners' interaction in the L2 classroom. Repeated use of such SCAs offers students the opportunity to review tasks and performance in a cooperative manner, thereby creating a relaxed learning environment full of repeated learning opportunities. These findings mirror those of Dörnyei and Ushioda (2001), who showed that time spent together and a shared group history promote group solidarity, and that the value of interaction lies in the influence of the participants' behavior on each other. Opportunities for such interaction were maximized in the present study by the use of SCAs as part of every lesson. The second conclusion to be drawn from this study is that students' learning motivation, as a reflection of learning autonomy, was promoted by the use of SCAs. In this regard, Dam (1995) suggests that classroom learner

autonomy is the product of interactive processes that emphasize interdependence rather than independence. A limitation of this study is that it did not reveal effective ways of reducing learners' negative feelings towards English. Although the data suggest that participants' negative feelings and anxiety were reduced by the end of the course, it is clear that active interaction and a relaxed environment are not sufficient to alleviate all the fear associated with English learning. Further research may shed light on this issue. In the meanwhile, we, as L2 teachers who aim to guide learners to successful learning, should strive to find ways of developing classroom interaction to its full potential, thereby contributing toward autonomous learning.

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