Jump-starting student motivation to use self-access learning facilities: a case-study of a class's use of a free-conversation area

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of various activities to encourage students to use a self-access English conversation area at a Japanese language university through action research. At this university, motivating freshman students to use this facility had been a problem reported by the university's teachers, despite seemingly high intrinsic motivation in the student body. A class of students were interviewed three times within a six-month period concerning their use of the conversation area. Throughout this period two activities were introduced into the 1st year basic English proficiency course program to encourage students to use the conversation area. The attitudes of students were compared over the course of six months to see if their use of the conversation area had been affected by these activities. It was found an extrinsically motivated speaking diary assignment was most useful in encouraging student use of the conversation area, although some students expressed anxiety over this activity.

Introduction and background to the study

In the field of Second Language Learning a number of factors have been attributed to affecting students' language acquisition. One of these factors, motivation, has been explored in great detail over the past few decades, since seminal research in the field by Garner was carried out in the 1960s. Motivation can be categorised into a number of types, such as intrinsic (self) and extrinsic (external rewards) motivation, with intrinsic motivation believed to be the more effective of the two in terms of language learning.

To encourage intrinsic motivation in students and to provide them with an outlet to harness this motivation, there has been an increased emphasis on self-access learning and learner autonomy in the realm of TEFL, resulting in the emergence of self-access centres (SAC) in many English language educational institutions. Malcolm observes: "Establishing facilities to promote self-directed learning has become a priority at more and more institutions" (2004: 346) as a way to involve students more in there own learning. Despite this development of SAC in recent years, however, Morrison (2005), argues there has been little research into the evaluation of student use of these centres. This study, therefore, addresses this lack of research in its evaluation of student motivation to use a self-access conversation area in an award-winning SAC at a Japanese university. Sprat et al argue that "motivation is a key factor that influences the extent to which learners are ready to learn autonomously" (2002: 245), thus ways to jump-start student motivation to use this facility will prove beneficial to other SAC in university settings.

Participants and setting

The university in which the current study was conducted has placed a great deal of emphasis on the development of its students as autonomous learners, culminating in the creation of an award-winning SAC in 2003 (see Cooker and Torpey 2004 for discussion). According to Cooker and Torpey (2004), motivating students to use the SAC and become autonomous learners is a key concern of the English curriculum at the university, especially in the freshman year.

In their article, Cooker and Torpey (2004) examines the 1st Year Basic Proficiency course at the university to illustrate the importance the university places "on fostering the capacity of our learners to become autonomous and on conveying to them the opportunities for self-directed learning" (16). The curriculum, therefore, incorporates a number of awareness raising activities, which encourage student use of the SAC. The current study examines one area of the SAC, which is unique to the university: a free conversation area, where students can drop in and speak to friends and teachers on duty in an English-only environment. Some activities within the 1st year English curriculum used to encourage students to use the area include: (1) independent-study diary; (2) teacher interview homework tasks; and (3) homework discussion tasks. This research aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of these activities in motivating students to use the conversation area.

Research methodology

The research was carried out as an action-based research project. According to Nunan (1994), action research is a form of research that is becoming increasingly significant in language eduction. He states that in the area of language education it involves research that is carried out by practitioners, or classroom teachers, rather than outside investigators (Nunan 1994). According to Kemmis and Taggart:

> A distinctive feature of action research is that those affected by planned changes have the primary responsibility for deciding on the course of critically informed action which seem likely to lead to improvement, and for evaluating the results of strategies tried out in practice. Action research is a group activity. (1988: 6)

Action research was deemed the most appropriate methodological framework to use because it allows the researcher to trial a number of activities within his or her own classroom to try to affect change. In addition, another benefit of conducting the project as action research was that the "practitioner as researcher" role takes advantage of knowledge of class dynamics and student personality that may go unnoticed by an outside researcher. Such knowledge is vital when dealing with a study involving issues of student motivation, anxiety and learning objectives. The study, therefore, was conducted as action-based research to take advantage of the researcher's knowledge of his own class, rather than it become a liability as viewed under other methodological frameworks.

Within the framework of action research, the following research questions

were addressed:

1. What effect do certain activities in the 1st year basic English proficiency course program have on student use of the conversation area?

2. How do students respond to these activities?

3. Do these activities promote further use of the conversation area?

Action research is circular research that always comes back to the research questions in cycles, each time attempting to answer the questions in more detail. The research procedure, therefore, reflected this style and was carried out as follows:

1. Students were introduced to the free conversation are and were explained the benefits of its use.

2. Students completed a study plan of three self-assigned items of independent study and were encouraged to include one visit to the conversation area as part of this plan. They also completed a teacher interview homework activity conducted in the conversation area.

3. The students were interviewed on their use of the conversation area during the sixth week of the first semester.

4. Students were encouraged to use the conversation area throughout the first semester through activities designed to create intrinsic motivation within the student body.

5. The students were interviewed on their use of the conversation area at the end of the first semester.

6. The students were assigned a speaking diary, which required them to go the conversation area to earn credit for The 1st year basic English proficiency course.

7. Students were interviewed five weeks into the semester to check on

their participation and attitudes towards the activity.

8. Students were interviewed at the end of the year on their attitudes towards the activity and their use of the conversation area.

Interviews were the primary instrument of data collection. Thus, the data collected was qualitative, which provides a more in-depth look at the issue than quantitative questionnaires would. As the project involves factors of student motivation, attitudes, anxiety and so forth, qualitative data analysis of a smaller group provides a richer set of data than would a questionnaire of a larger student population. The research procedure therefore was carefully selected according to the methodological framework of action research and the type of data yielded by the project.

Discussion of results

The first activities were very negatively motivated, requiring the students to go as part of their 1st year basic English proficiency course studies. These activities are termed negatively motivated activities because it was found that students were motivated more because they feared the repercussions of not participating (going to class having not done their homework) than the incentive of completing the task (practicing their English). Ellis (1994) states that negatively motivated language learning tasks cause many negative effects on the learner, such as despising the task, not seeing the worth of a task and high levels of anxiety. Accordingly, comments from the first interviews reflected the literature.

The students were required in the two orientation activities to complete

their tasks in the self-access learning centre and the free conversation area. They were required to go to the conversation area once for the homework teacher interview and were encouraged to go at least once more as part of their independent study task. Despite this, 11 out of the 27 freshman students did not go to the area at all in their first 6 weeks at The university (see Table 1, *below*).

Student Use of Conversation Area, May 2004
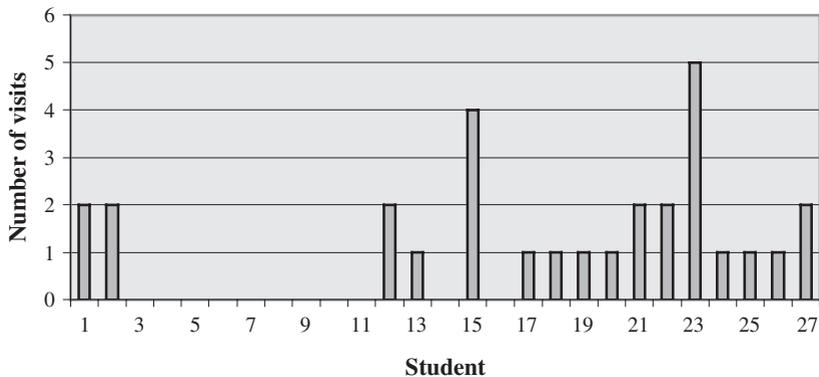
In addition, eight students went only once, six of which for their independent study task and the other two for the interview. Six students went to the area as the minimum number of visits required to complete the two tasks. In total, only two out of the 27 freshman students went to the area more than the required amount with one student visiting five times and the other four. Interestingly, in their interviews eleven of the students suggested a strong desire to use the free conversation area on a regular basis, but elected a range of reasons to explain their inability to take advantage of this resource (see Table 2, *below*).

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Reasons given for not using the Conversation Area
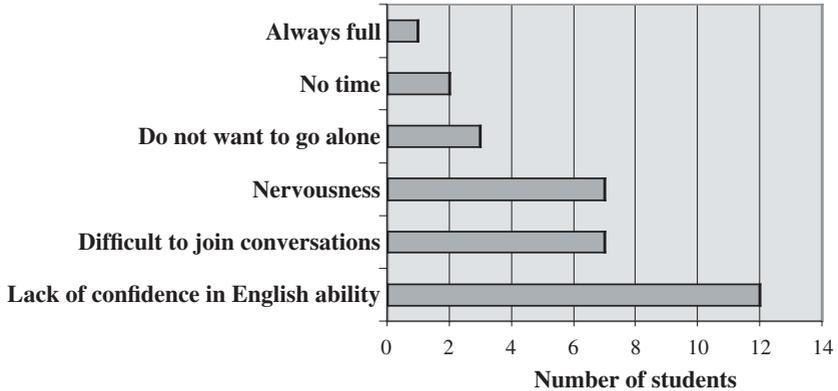
In the interviews twelve comments were made regarding a lack of confidence in the student's own ability to use the free conversation area. In addition to this, seven comments were recorded which expressed difficulty in joining conversations that had already started among the various groups of students in the area. There were seven comments expressing a high degree on nervousness, three of which attributed their nervousness to a shy personality. Three students expressed negative experiences about going to the area alone and one student complained that it was always too full. In addition to this, two students attributed their non-use of the conversation area to a lack of time. Thus, overall the students understood the benefits of using the free conversation area and expressed a desire to use it in the future, but expressed very negative experiences and high anxiety over its use due do a lack of confidence in English ability and anxiety.

According to many researchers, intrinsically motivated students progress

more with their language learning than students motivated by other factors (see for example Ellis 1994, Deci and Ryan 1985). Intrinsic motivation can be defined as motivation to learn arising from within the student due to interest in the materials, curiosity or as part of integrative motivation (the desire to learn in order to become part of another language culture). According to Deci and Ryan (1985), intrinsic motivation leads to more effective learning, and is promoted in circumstances in which the focus of control is clearly with the learner. Ellis (1994: 516) also states "one way intrinsic interest in L2 learning might be achieved is by providing opportunities for communication". He also adds that, in order for intrinsic motivation to develop, tasks must not only be centered on the students seeing the benefit and worth of a task, but also the challenge of completing it. According to the literature, therefore, the self-access learning centre and the associated conversation area appeared to be primary breeding grounds for intrinsically motivated students. The opportunity for real communication was provided by this facility and the students had already expressed a strong desire to use it in the first interview and seemed to recognize its benefits. Therefore, during the remainder of the semester, the students were continually encouraged to take it upon themselves to use the conversation area as a means to advance their English. This was done through the continual positive reinforcement of its benefits through the semester. The class also took part in a number of awareness raising activities of the benefits of using each section of the conversation area (practice area/writing centre/ free conversation area). They brainstormed and discussed the benefits and advantages of using each of these sections. The students responded to such awareness raising activities very positively and seemed motivated to learn and practice their English using this facility in the future.

A second interview took place at the end of the second semester to evaluate the use of the conversation area in the second half of first semester due to these awareness-raising activities. Use of the facility is depicted in table 3 (below).

Student use of the Conversation Area, July 2004
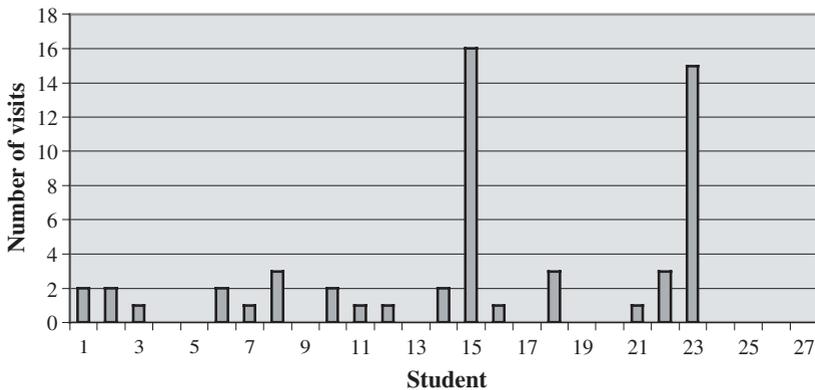
During the remaining seven weeks of the first semester, 16 students went to the conversation area at least once—eight of which went between two and three times. Two students visited the facility more than twenty times. The remaining eleven students did not go at all. The result was surprising considering at the first interview the majority of the students were encouraged to go to the conversation area more frequently as part of their self-directed independent study program. The results of the second interview were in contradiction with the literature on motivation, which indicated students who are highly interested in language learning and have the opportunity of conversation take advantage of such opportunities due to intrinsic motivation.

Explanation for students not using the conversation area reflected those answers from the first interview. There were 12 comments regarding a lack of confidence with their English ability, 8 comments saying they were too busy, 6 comments saying they were not in a habit of going or had forgotten their plans to use the facility and 10 comments regarding nervousness or shyness about sitting down with other students or teachers they did not know. Two students regularly attended the area with friends from other classes. They both expressed anxiety during the first couple of sessions but stated they felt comfortable soon after. Therefore, apart from the two frequent users, the class in general did not use the conversation area despite a high degree of interest and desire to use this facility indicating high intrinsic motivation.

According to second language learning research, motivation is just one aspect that affects second language learning. Studies on Japanese students have shown factors including personality and anxiety affect the degree of influence other factors have on language learning (Norris-Holt 2001). The class used as participants in this study was a bottom-tiered class, placing them in the bottom 25% of freshman students according to a proficiency test administered at entrance. Lower ability in terms of language achievement is often predicative of high anxiety in the situation of using language around more capable peers. Likewise "anxiety arising out of poor performance, communication comprehension, test and fear of negative evaluation is likely to have a deliberating effect on L2 learning" (Ellis 1994: 523). Because the factor of anxiety was directly interfering with the class's use of the conversation area as shown in the interviews, new measures needed to be undertaken to trigger other motivation types.

Having had unsuccessful results from intrinsically motivated and negatively motivated activities, in the second semester the class explored extrinsic motivation and instrumental motivation to encourage more use of the conversation area. While many researchers argue that intrinsic motivation has the largest effect on language acquisition (see Dickinson 1995 for discussion), Dornyei (1990: 62), a prominent researcher in the field of motivation, showed that instrumental motives significantly contribute to motivation in EFL contexts, and can involve a number of extrinsic motives. She also argues that instrumental motives most effectively promote learning up to the intermediate level, but to go beyond this level the learner must be integratively (intrinsically) motivated. Ellis (1994: 513) describes instrumental motivation as the carrot and the stick hypothesis, which "sees external incentives and influences as determinants of learner's motivational strength". This analogy seemed fit for the current situation when it became apparent that a "carrot" was needed to coax these pre-intermediate level students into the conversation area to encourage them to continue using it until their anxiety lessened. The "carrot", therefore, came in the form of a speaking diary that would replace the previous semester's written diary and would be worth credit towards their 1st year basic English proficiency course grade. Students were able to earn one credit or one percent (maximum of 10 credits) for each visit where they engaged in conversation for at least 15 minutes, although much longer visits were encouraged. Unlike the first activity in the orientation unit, this activity was positively motivated—where students would be rewarded for using the conversation area rather than doing it because of undesirable consequences if they did not (negatively motivated). The students had to keep a log of the names of students involved in each conversation, the topics discussed and a

self-evaluation of their performance. The students were encouraged to take advantage of the practice area and to go for the first time with a classmate, to lessen feelings of anxiety or a lack of confidence in their English ability. The use of external and instrumental motivation was seen as a way to coax students into the conversation area before allowing their integrative and intrinsic motives to take over.

Five weeks into the program, students took part in a third interview to check on their progress. Their use of the facility had changed noticeably with all students having visited it at least once (see Table 4, *below*).

**Student use of Conversation Area, Oct 2004**
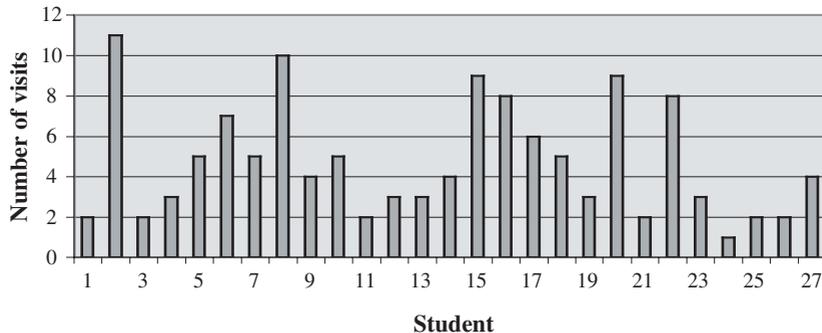
One student had gone once, five students had gone twice and seven students had gone three to four times (a frequency of about once a week). Five students had gone five to six times and two had gone up to seven times (a little more than once a week). Three students had used the facility nine to eleven times (a frequency of twice a week). Table 5 (*below, top*) shows the total number

of visits to the area after each interview (roughly at 6 week intervals), and Table 6 (*below, bottom*) shows the same information broken down to visits made by each student.

Total Conversation Area Visits in 2004

1=Apr-May; 2=Jun-Jul; 3=Sept-Oct
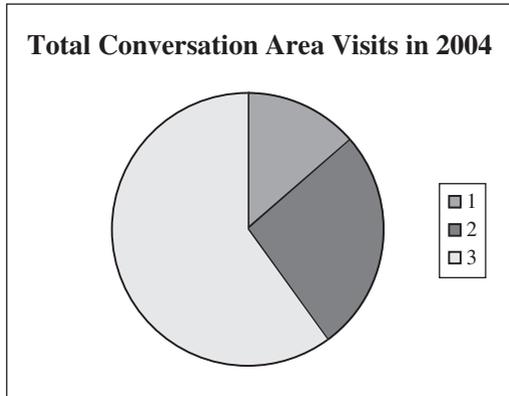
Total Conversation Area Visits in 2004
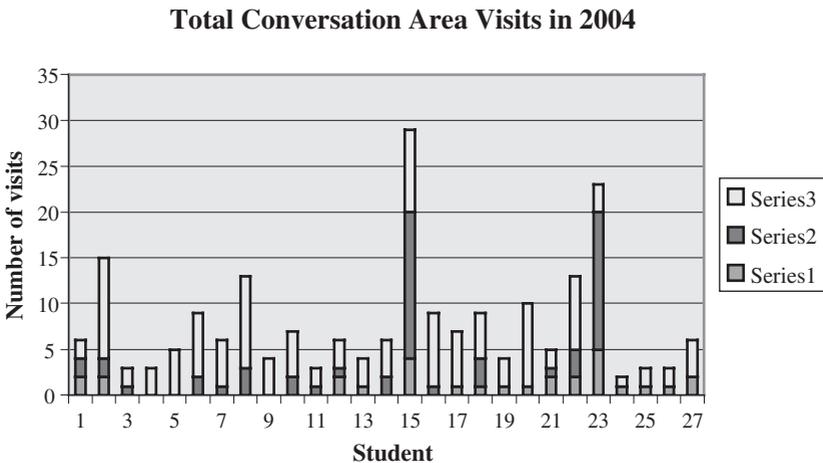
1=Apr-May; 2=Jun-Jul; 3=Sept-Oct

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These results indicate total student visits to the conversation area increased dramatically after the introduction of the speaking diary and that this finding held true for 25 out of 27 students. The forth interview, therefore, revealed a dramatic increase in visits made by the students to the conversation area.

Comments from the interviews revealed students were very interested in continuing to use the free conversation facility. Comments also indicated students understood the worth of doing the speaking activity despite a high level anxiety over the task. All but one student said they would use the facility in the future. 23 students said they enjoyed using the conversation area and found the speaking activity to be useful. 16 students still admitted nervousness over using the facility, while ten expressed that while they had some anxiety over their ability or their shyness on their first few visits they were no longer anxious about using it. Some of the reasons expressed by students over the use of the conversation area are listed below (the number of students who mentioned this reason in their interviews is shown inside the parentheses).

Improving English ability	Practicing English
• Can improve my English (7) • Learn vocabulary (2) • Learn many things (1) • Teachers are helpful (2) • To speak English well (5)	• Practice English (5) • Brush up on English (4) • Can speak with native speaker (8) • Good opportunity to use English (6)
Change attitude/thinking	**Social**
• Get positive attitude to learning (1) • Forces me to speak English (3) • To get used to speaking English (2) • Makes me remember English is hard (2) • To get me into the habit of going/to make me a more active learner (2) • Increase my confidence (1)	• Can talk with teachers (find out about them and their opinions) (4) • Can talk with friends (inc. listening to their opinions) (7) • Can use English for conversation (2) • Enjoyable/Interesting (7) • Relaxing environment/easily accessible (3)

Such a wide range of comments on the benefits of using the facility, therefore, indicate that even though there still was a high incidence of anxiety, this was far outweighed by the positive feedback on student use of the conversation area.

The results from the third interview, therefore, indicated that students of a pre-intermediate level, who are anxious about using the conversation area, could be encouraged to use it with extrinsically motivated activities. It also suggests that, once using it, motivation to continue using it may have also been sparked.

4. Conclusion and recommendations for further research

Results from the literature review and data analysis indicated that the university is well established to cater for intrinsically motivated students wishing to engage in conversation. However, while intrinsic motivation is high at this university as evident from students' desire to use the conversation area, other factors such as personality and anxiety reacted against the desire to take advantage of this facility. It is also evident that at the beginning of the year, negatively motivated activities requiring students to use the area as part of their class studies, caused anxiety in the majority of students in the class and did not encourage its use after the completion of these activities. Students did, however, understand the worth of the activity. The results of the second interview indicated that even though students wanted to use the conversation area, they did not take advantage of it for a number of different reasons, including a lack of confidence in ability, shyness and a lack of free

time. The third interview indicated an extrinsically or instrumentally motivated activity was useful in finally promoting the facility's use. This is supported by literature that suggests extrinsically motivated activities (carrot on the stick activities) are more effective in pre-intermediate level EFL settings. Whether motivation to continue to use the conversation continues after the completion of the speaking diary activity is an area of further research into this field, but it is certain that such an activity is effective in coaxing students into using such facilities and in helping them to confront their anxieties.

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