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# **The ELI Practice Centre: investigating role, purpose and satisfaction in a complex interactional space**

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## **Introduction**

### ***A complex interactional space: The Practice Centre at KUIS***

Providing opportunities for authentic L2 interaction for foreign language students in EFL settings has long been a challenge to many tertiary institutions. At Kanda University of International Studies in Japan, one response to this issue has been the establishment in 2003 of a conversational Practice Centre (PC), staffed by English-speaking teachers, where students can practice their English communication skills outside the usual classroom setting.

The practice centre is a semi-structured space used by students to practice any aspect of oral communication in English. Up to three students can voluntarily reserve a 15-minute time slot in which they can interact with a member of the ELI (although most students using the service do so alone). The physical setup of the PC is relatively basic and consists of a reservation sheet (on which students write their name(s) and topic next to an ELI member's time slot) and a table with four chairs. Many students use it to complete homework assignments in which they are required to communicate with someone outside of the classroom (although it

should be noted that teachers are not supposed to specifically request that their students use the PC). The range of oral activities includes general conversation, presentations, interviews, and practice for specific exams such as TOEIC or IELTS. The extent to which students write down a topic on the reservation sheet varies from no topic at all to quite specific topics such as 'Ways to relieve stress' or 'Human rights in Indonesia'.

Since its inception in 2003, the PC has proved to be very popular with students and more time slots were provided to meet demand. However, the exact parameters of the purpose of the PC and the roles of the teachers staffing it and the students using it had not been clearly defined, in part to allow the PC to evolve in response to use and demand. In addition, varying levels of satisfaction with interactions at the PC were often discussed by teachers and reported in students' reflective journals. As a result of the way in which it had been institutionally established and the manner in which it was being used, the PC had come to occupy a somewhat nebulous space within the university. It was at once not within the classroom but still within the bounds of the educational institution. It was staffed by professional language teachers and had a broad educational goal underpinning it but the interactional constraints allowed for informality, familiarity and in some cases, perhaps even friendship. Use of the PC was strictly on an optional basis although many students were choosing to use the space to do compulsory homework tasks. How then, were teachers and students negotiating this complex set of discursive constraints and affordances that the PC presented to them? Questions remained as to exactly what kinds of interactions were commonly taking place and what kinds of interactional and institutional roles were being performed. In addition, we wished to explore the

wider question of how the interactions within the PC could be improved for both the students and the teachers. To this end, after identifying the immediate stakeholders involved in the PC, this study set out to answer the following questions:

From the various perspectives of the students and teachers:

- what is the purpose of the PC?
- what are the respective roles of the teachers and students interacting at the PC?
- to what extent do these beliefs about the purpose of and roles played in PC interactions impact upon both parties' interactional satisfaction?
- how can the interactions be improved?

This paper first highlights the importance of beliefs in social interaction before going on to detail the methodology used in this study. We then illustrate the commonalities and disparities in beliefs found in this research, in terms of the way that both teachers and students conceptualise the purpose and the respective roles played by interlocutors in practice centre interactions, before investigating how these beliefs have impacted on both parties' degrees of satisfaction with those interactions. Suggestions are then made for ways in which greater convergence of beliefs and negotiations of role and purpose could be facilitated in order to ensure both student and teacher satisfaction and greater communicative success.

## **Literature Review**

One of the essential conditions for successful social interaction is a shared

understanding amongst all of the agents involved of the contingent constraints and affordances shaping what is allowed to be said or otherwise communicated and how this is done (Levinson, 1979). Most social interactions or what Levinson refers to as “activity types” have a set of culturally embedded ‘rules’ that develop over time but are largely stable and continually reaffirmed (and sometimes challenged) by those who participate in such interactions. Levinson notes that due to culturally specific nature of these rules ‘they are likely to play a large role in cross-cultural ... miscommunications’ (ibid., p. 393). Tannen (1984) has discussed some of the interactional dimensions through which discourse communities can differ in terms of the rules that shape activity types.

If we are interested in observing what happens when people grapple with a new set of communicative rules in a culture they are not well-versed in, a good place to start might be a language classroom. In recent years, numerous studies have explored how the communication that takes place within the language classroom shapes participation and ultimately learning (see for example Johnson, 1995; Seedhouse, 2004; Walsh, 2006; Dalton-Puffer, 2007). Gardner and Wagner (2004) have explored how speakers of various second languages construct discourse independent of a formal educational context. To date however, there have been no studies that have looked at what happens in a space like the practice centre that, as noted in the introduction, occupies a fuzzy space, somewhere between the classroom and the world outside. In addition, these studies have primarily focused on the analysis of the interaction itself, largely through transcripts of spoken interactions between students or between teachers and students. If the focus of the analysis falls solely on the actual discourse, we limit ourselves in terms

of understanding the beliefs that drive the linguistic, semantic and communicative choices that interlocutors make during interaction. As Johnson (1995) notes when considering the limitations of such an approach, this leaves some interesting questions unanswered:

What conceptions of language teaching do these teachers hold? Why do the teachers seem to be so different? What prior experiences may have influenced how they understand their roles as teachers? In other words, what constitutes these teachers' frames of reference, and how do these frames of reference shape the ways in which they chose to organize the patterns of communication in their second language classrooms? (p. 109)

Similar questions remain in terms of the students:

What sorts of linguistic and interactional competencies do these students possess? ... How closely do these competencies match those expected by their teachers? What sorts of prior experiences have these students had in classrooms? In short, what constitutes these students' frames of reference and how do these frames of reference shape the ways in which students participate in and learn from classroom activities? (p.109-110)

What Johnson is here referring to as 'frames of reference' have been explored by SLA scholars working within the field of learner and teacher beliefs (Horwitz, 1988; Sakui and Gaies, 1999, Borg, 2003; Kalaja and Barcelos, 2003) as researchers have become increasingly aware of the primary role that such beliefs play in the way that both learners and teachers approach the language learning process.

While few existing studies have chosen to directly compare learner and teacher beliefs (Kern, 1995; MacCargar, 1993, Ellwood and Nakane, 2009; Wan et al, 2011), those that have often been motivated by a recognition that disparities in beliefs between teachers and learners can have a significant impact on their interactions (Ellwood and Nakane, 2009) and the learning process itself (MacCargar, 1993, Wan et al, 2011).

As discussed above, when two or more people from different cultures undertake an activity-type together, they may approach it with a different set of beliefs about what rules are governing various aspects of the interaction such as the purpose of the interaction and the roles that are expected of each of the participants. In the case of this study, PC sessions can be viewed as an activity type, distinct from classroom discourses, and as such the individual interactions which take place within it are governed by the beliefs and assumptions of participants. When these assumptions about purpose and role are not aligned, it is perhaps unsurprising that such interactions are not deemed to be successful by either party. In order to investigate the reasons why these interactions may be failing to satisfy those participants, it is therefore necessary to first determine the expectations and assumptions those invested in the centre bring to it.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants and data collection***

A mixed-method approach was used to collect the data over two academic years. During the first academic year, 29 teachers worked at the PC and six of them were randomly selected and participated in semi-structured interviews. These

interviews were recorded and analysed by both researchers. Informed by this analysis, a survey comprising of both closed and open-ended questions was developed, piloted and sent out in the second semester of the first academic year to the remaining 23 teachers, 15 of whom completed the survey. As the study progressed, a second follow-up survey was administered to the teachers during the second semester of the second academic year and this was also completed by 15 teachers. It should be noted here that the teachers staffing the PC changed slightly between the two academic years (as some teachers changed their ELI duties or left, being replaced by new teachers) which may have affected the data. However, there were no major changes to the PC or how it was run and the surveys were completed at approximately the same stage of both academic years so it can be presumed that the different teachers' experiences were generally consistent over the two years.

A mixed methods approach was also used to elicit student data. A homework task that required students to engage in conversation using English outside of the classroom and complete a reflective report was given to students across various departments. The reflective report asked students to note what was said during the conversation and then reflect on the experience in English. The reports of those students who had completed the assignment using the PC were collected, copied and analysed. A survey based on a similar structure to the teacher survey was developed and sent to all of the undergraduates at the university. Whilst the teacher survey was in English, the questions in the student survey were written in both English and Japanese and students were free to choose which language they used when answering the questions. A total of 81 students took the survey

although 16 of these had never used the PC and so were discounted from the data set.

Three members of the institutional directors also participated in semi-structured interviews in English, in order to provide some context to the study. All citations from the surveys and interviews used are in their original form, with translations provided where necessary.

### ***Data analysis***

In terms of analytic procedure, samples were taken from each data set and independently rough coded by the two researchers. These rough coding systems were then compared and developed into a more final coding system that both researchers agreed upon. This system was further refined as the analysis proceeded with the mutual consent of both researchers.

## **Findings**

### ***Purpose***

Key to any understanding of practice centre interactions is establishing what both parties consider to be the purpose of that interaction. Both students and teachers were asked what they considered to be the purpose of practice centre sessions. Teachers in the survey and interviews recognised that the practice centre differed from the classroom, in that it offered opportunities for one to one interaction with students, but saw these interactions as taking place both “in a relaxed setting”, compared to the classroom, and “in a more controlled setting” than genuine free conversation. It was recognised that the purpose of each individual session was

decided by the individual student:

The student's role has not been explicitly defined by the Practice Center so I think how a student approaches the center is entirely up to them.

### *Input versus output*

Three important distinctions of purpose were evident in the data. The first involved the centre as both a place where students practised their own language skills (outputting), and where they went to receive input from teachers, about such topics as the teacher's culture or experiences, opinions on news items, advice for improving their learning skills among others. As one teacher commented, "in reality it functions both as a practice center and an advising center."

### *Authentic versus structured interaction*

The second distinction concerns the nature of the interaction, with some characterising the centre as a place for more structured speaking encounters, while others saw it as a place for genuine interactions between learners and teachers. So while one teacher characterised the centre as:

an opportunity for specialized, or focused, practice [...] on a specific area of language that the student feels is in need of more attention",

another felt strongly that "I want to interact with the learner(s) as I would in an everyday conversation, and not just fire away with question after question." This desire for genuine interaction was also shared by some learners, who wanted a practice centre session "not to think it to be study, but just chatting."

### *Voluntary versus required use*

The final distinction was one between learners who were intrinsically motivated to use the centre to improve their language skills, and those who came to complete homework assignments. While teachers recognised that the centre could be used for either purpose, several teachers seemed to view those using it of their own volition to be more legitimate users, using the centre for “what it’s meant to be there for”, while also recognising that compulsory homework assignments, made up a significant quantity of the sessions.

In the data, perhaps unsurprisingly due to the diversity of their interactions with students, teachers were generally aware of these multiple purposes the centre served, whereas students were more likely to identify one such function, although the whole range is present across the student data.

### *Rapport*

In addition to these varied purposes, both students and teachers recognised that one function the centre played was as a forum for rapport-building between students and teachers. As one teacher stated: “Some learners see it as a way of learning more about the teacher, or the teacher's culture.” This is, however, equally true of teachers, as one respondent noted: “[PC interactions are an] opportunity to develop relationships that make teaching classes easier.” One student supported this view, specifically connecting good rapport to their language learning process:

Not only for practice, but also for chatting with our teachers, and it might help us to get along with them. Then we have more chances to talk to them and can

improve our speaking and listening skills.

The importance of rapport between teacher and learner in the learning process has been recognised by humanistic approaches to language teaching which became popular from the 1980s (Williams & Burden, 1997). The concept of affect, hinted at here, can be seen as playing a significant role in students' attributions of success and satisfaction (see below).

### ***Role***

The distinctions in purpose detailed above have wide-reaching implications for how both teachers and students conceptualise their role at the centre. The surveys and interviews asked participants to identify how they viewed their own role, and that of their interlocutor in the session. The data sets reveal that both students and teachers tend to identify similar themes in terms of role, but a close examination of the responses reveals some interesting disparities, both between teachers and students and within the differing responses in the teacher and student data sets. While teachers had broad agreement on the purposes of the PC, there is considerably more variety in their conceptualisation of the roles played in those interactions. This reminds us that these teachers should not be characterised as a homogeneous group, but as individuals who are bringing their own personalities and beliefs about the nature of successful interaction to their sessions with students. Likewise, different students also had differing expectations of their teachers, depending on their purpose for using the centre.

### *Preparation*

Students tended to describe their own role in terms of practical responsibilities, with the most common factors identified being a responsibility to come (and leave) on time, and to prepare for the session. This focus on time-keeping and particularly preparation as the students' responsibility was also highlighted by teachers.

A closer look at the student data on preparation, however, reveals that students seem to have quite a simplistic view of what preparation requires. In the majority of cases this is limited to "I must decide a topic", often something as simple as "my summer vacation", or frequently, "your summer vacation", a distinction of which students rarely seem aware, but which usually results in the student asking a question at the beginning and then expecting the teacher to fill the next 15 minutes of talk time, despite the fact that they are usually there to improve their own speaking skill. This topic guideline is one given by the centre, which, while clear and easy to understand, seems to have failed to communicate to students precisely what coming prepared involves. The teacher data reveals that many teachers expect students to have a well-thought out topic, and possibly to have researched vocabulary they will try to use and to have an opinion or some questions to ask the teacher to facilitate the communication.

### *Active participation*

The degree of preparation expected by teachers and students is closely related to the most salient theme in the data set, that of active participation. Students and teachers are in broad agreement that the student should be an active participant in

the session, but differ as to the degree of participation expected. While students talk regularly of being active, which is characterised by such things as, “don’t be scared to speak”, or:

積極的に会話をし、その時間を楽しむこと。また、分からないことをどんどん質問していくこと。[Speak actively and enjoy that time. Ask lots of questions if I don’t understand].

teachers were more likely to expect students to take the lead, illustrated by comments such as:

The student’s role is to decide the focus of and lead the session. The teacher’s role is to follow the student’s lead.

The student is the initiator, the teacher is the reactor.

Teachers’ desire to see students assume responsibility for leading the session, starting with thorough preparation of a topic, probably originates from their professional training as teachers and understanding of the role of practice and focus on form in second language acquisition. It may also be influenced by the strong emphasis on learner autonomy at the university, by which teachers are expected to encourage learners to “take charge of [their] own learning” (Holec, 1981). This is reflected in the distribution of talk time which many teachers allotted to students, who tended to expect 50% or more to come from the student (see below).

This view, however, fails to take into account the constraining role of status in any

interactions between learners and teachers. Johnson (1995) has discussed the ways in which 'teachers' control of the patterns of communication determines, to a large extent, how, when, where, and with whom language is to be used in the classroom' (p. 16) and how students often understand and recreate their own complicity with these patterns. Indeed, she posits that one of the most important skills influencing a student's ability to perceive the communication patterns of a classroom:

[is] to accurately infer teachers' expectations and intentions. To do this, students must be able to infer both the academic task structure and the social participation structure, and to fit their language into those structures. (p. 99)

As noted in the introduction, the PC is somewhat of a novel space for most students and for many they have only 15 minutes to make these sophisticated and nuanced inferences. This may be further complicated by the cross-cultural nature of the interaction at the centre. Cultures differ in terms of the communicative norms such as tolerance of silence, what can be asked, what kinds of stories can be told and for how long (Tannen, 1984, Nakane and Ellwood, 2009). Whilst acknowledging Tanaka's (1999) counsel to be cautious about often essentialised portrayals of Japanese communication patterns that are based on intuition rather than empirical studies (p. 8), there are numerous studies that claim the Japanese speakers are more likely to give up conversational floor space to people they perceive as being of higher social status (Kunihiro, 1976), follow Confucian conceptions of teacher and student roles in which students are expected to be silent until asked to speak (Tweed & Lehman, 2002) and experience difficulty participating in communicatively orientated learning tasks (Wordell, 1985).

We could argue that the institutionally governed roles of 'teacher' and 'student' in the classroom could become more blurred at the PC due to its physical (and symbolic) location outside of the classroom. As the findings indicate (below), the role for the teacher seems to shift to from a classroom based 'instructor' to more of a 'facilitator' or even 'advisory' role. Clemente, in relation to language counselling, notes that, although counsellors may use their power more implicitly than teachers in the classroom, or even attempt to reject it, and interact on an equal basis, "It is a fallacy to think that there is equality between the counsellor and learner," (2003:213). Furthermore, no student in the data set expressed a similar desire to lead a session; for them, being active within the conversation was sufficient.

Interestingly, this preference for active participation is not confined to the teachers; students also want teachers to be active in the conversation: "積極的に話してほしい。[I want the teacher to speak actively]," and this plays a major factor in student satisfaction. This may be a reaction to experiences where the teacher holds back to elicit more production from the student, but, as can be seen below, it is often interpreted by the student as a lack of interest or engagement.

#### *Teacher as facilitator*

The data reveals a broad agreement on the teacher as playing a facilitating role, not only in linguistic but also affective terms. Linguistically, students expect teachers to adjust to each student's level and support the interaction:

生徒のレベルをいち早く把握して、それに合わせて話してくれること。あまり話せないときには、サポートしてくれること。 [The teacher should

grasp the student's level quickly, and speak accordingly. Support them when they can't speak well.]

This view was generally shared by teachers, who understood that:

The teacher acts as the interlocutor to help the student develop and express her ideas.

From an affective standpoint, being welcoming and making students comfortable was recognised by teachers as part of their role:

The role of the teacher is to encourage more production from the students by creating a comfortable communication environment.

I feel the teacher should be a coach at the practice center. The teacher is there to mentor, support, and encourage the student.

However, while teachers seemed to see this as just one aspect of their role, with many not referring to it at all, this affective dimension was often characterised as the most important teacher role in the eyes of students:

ただ、英語でフレンドリーに話してもらえたらそれだけでいいです。 [As long as the teacher speaks in a friendly way, that's enough.]

英語を話すとき、ナーバスになることもあるのでリラックスさせてほしい。 [I am often nervous when I speak English, so I want the teacher to make me feel relaxed].

and was often closely associated with linguistic facilitation:

The role of the teacher should be assistant to the user. They should have motivation to listen and speak to users, lead to achieve user's goal / purpose, and be a good listener and speaker for user to practice comfortably.

This emphasis from students on affective facilitation, and its relative absence from the teacher data, suggests that some teachers may underestimate the importance of the role of affect in communication, although it has been well-documented (Arnold, 1999). This is confirmed by looking at the data on student satisfaction (below).

Despite this general agreement on the teacher as a facilitator, a significant minority of students still saw the teacher fulfilling a more "teacher-like" role, despite the setting of the PC:

I think the roles of the teachers are to listen the student and correct some mistakes or teach synonyms and the similar idioms to the students.

The data reveals that teacher and student roles are therefore complicated, and are influenced by a number of factors: the purpose of the session, the individual teacher and student involved in the interaction, and their beliefs and expectations. Teachers generally recognised the flexibility of their own role, acknowledging the fact that it was often student purpose which determined roles, while some identified a degree of negotiation:

I would describe it as collaborative. The student and I will find some way to make the 15 minutes most useful to the student's goal for the session.

When looking at interview data, an even more complex view of teacher and student roles as dynamic and context-dependent becomes clear. These teachers recognised that their role in relation to any one student is strongly influenced by the level of familiarity that the student has with the nature of a practice centre session. In this way, roles evolve over time as students gain more experience of using the centre, develop a relationship with individual teachers and also improve their own communicative competence. In a fifteen-minute session with a new student, however, it is understandable that teachers have little time to negotiate their role with students, resulting in some unsatisfactory encounters for both parties.

### ***Variation amongst teachers***

#### *Talk time*

Teachers were also asked about their expectations in terms of how much conversational ‘floor’ (Seedhouse, 2004) the students should ideally occupy, the percentage of students that came prepared with a topic (as is stipulated by the institutional set up of the PC), and what kinds of topics, if any, that they felt uncomfortable talking about. The data showed that large amounts of variation existed between individual teachers in terms of these beliefs and perceptions.

In terms of the ideal amount of the conversation that the teacher expected the student to occupy with their own turns, most teachers’ responses were spread between 50 and 70% of the total talk time, indicating that whilst some teachers approached the activity as a collaborative event that both parties should work together equally on, there was a general tendency to place a greater onus on the

student to speak rather than listen. Indeed, one teacher in particular expected around 90% of the talk time to be taken on by the student. These findings may illustrate a mismatch in terms of beliefs about the purpose of the PC given the above finding that many students understood the PC to be a place where they could go for linguistic and cultural input as well as output.

### *Topic*

There was an even greater level of variation between the teachers' reports about how many students came with a prepared topic. At the lower end of the scale, three teachers said that only 20-25% of students came with a topic whereas another three teachers reported that 80-90% of students had topics. This could indicate one of two realities; either the percentage of students who brought topics actually did vary to this extent between individual teachers or that individual teachers differed in terms of what they accepted as a legitimate topic. Certainly, close analysis of the sign up sheets lent support to the latter reality as no real discernible differences could be found between the students' declared topics for individual teachers.

Teachers also differed to some extent when asked to provide examples of what, if any, topics they had felt uncomfortable talking about with students at the PC. Of the 14 teachers who answered the question, 10 reported that they had never felt uncomfortable with any of the topics students had brought up. However, four teachers said that they were uncomfortable with certain topics which included personal information about families, future plans and giving students advice on their personal problems.

As these findings illustrate, there were notable areas of variation amongst PC teachers in terms of how much they expected students to talk, the topics that they were comfortable talking about and perhaps also their individual understandings about what constituted a ‘proper’ topic. This raises questions about how easy it is for students to navigate these expectations and beliefs successfully. What happens to the student who comes prepared to participate as an equal partner in conversation about their weekend plans but is actually expected to talk for 90% of the time and to have thought of a more complex topic? How might teachers react when asked questions about their personal life that they feel uncomfortable talking about (especially if another teacher was completely comfortable talking about the same subject)? In the next section of the paper we will discuss teacher and student beliefs about which factors affected whether their interactions were satisfying or not. Indeed, we will also discuss how these dimensions of difference between teachers could be linked to the success of the interaction.

### ***Factors affecting satisfaction***

Both students and teachers were asked to identify the factors that they felt played a role in both very satisfying and unsatisfying interactions at the PC. Teachers were asked to identify the common factors that linked satisfying interactions and those that linked unsatisfying interactions. The topic of whose feelings of satisfaction the question pertained to was left purposefully vague and open for respondents to interpret as they wished (i.e. satisfying for themselves, for the students or both). This allowed us to explore the intriguing question as to whether teachers (who are taking part in the interaction as part of their professional role) considered their own levels of satisfaction when answering the question or whether they considered it

solely from the point of view of the student using the service. Students were asked to think of both a satisfying and unsatisfying interaction that they had participated in at the PC and identify the respective factors that led to these feelings. As with the teacher survey, the notion of who this level of satisfaction pertained to was left open for the students to interpret, to ascertain whether the students considered not just their own feelings as users of the service but also those of their interlocutor (even though they are there in a professional capacity). As with beliefs about the purpose of the PC and the respective roles of the interlocutors discussed above, the data showed both areas of agreement and marked areas of contrasts between teachers and students.

Broadly, the interlocutors' interest in the topic and the extent to which the conversation flowed smoothly were both common factors affecting the level of satisfaction that emerged through both the student and teacher data. However, as a detailed analysis will show, the ways in which the two parties described these factors and who they attributed them to differed in crucial ways.

### *Interest in Topic*

Both teachers and students often attributed the level of interest in the topic as a key factor in whether the interaction was satisfying or not. As these teachers noted when reflecting on satisfying interactions:

[students] are considerate of the instructor, meaning they actually try to have a conversation that both parties are interested in.

... there is a commonality found that I can speak with the student about.

Conversely, unsatisfying interactions were characterised by many teachers as being centered around 'boring', 'generic' and 'monotonous' topics such as 'Do you like Japanese food?' or hobbies and vacations. The use of terms such as 'generic' or 'monotonous' indicate a key finding from the teacher data; that it was not necessarily the topics themselves that were problematic but the frequency with which they were expected to talk about them.

Students too acknowledged the positive influence of finding a common topic that both parties were interested in, as this student reported:

The teacher and I liked same musician, so we could be excited to talk about him.

However, they were often just as aware of the negative effect of not preparing a topic that both student and teacher found interesting:

[I] prepare one topic which I would like to discuss with a teacher but he didn't say his opinion well. I thought each person has the field. That topic must not be his.

Because his motivation of topic was not really good. The topic was about TESOL, and I hoped to hear more exciting story but it was not really excited topic to him, so I was a little shocked about it.

As has been noted above, one of the main differences in the ways in which the two parties approached PC conversations is that for students, each interaction is a 'one off' in the sense that the interaction appears to them to be somewhat unique; they have little awareness of the discourse that the teacher has participated in

before they arrive. It may be necessary then to find ways in which teachers can better communicate to students what sorts of topics they are personally interested in talking about.

### *Conversation Flow*

Both teachers and students also identified what could broadly be termed the smoothness with which the conversation proceeded as being a factor in terms of the perceived level of satisfaction. Interestingly, the flow of the conversation was most often identified by teachers as being dependent on the student's communicative competence in English and rarely their own. Teachers reported positively of students 'having the ability to hold a conversation that lasts 15 minutes' and being 'happy to communicate naturally' and able to engage in a "catch-ball" style conversation', whilst negatively evaluating those who:

seem to have no knowledge of English conversational conventions (they don't ask follow-up questions, they wait for me to initiate topics, they abruptly switch topics in the middle of the conversation, etc.).

Interestingly, whilst students also wrote about the importance of conversation flow and their own communicative competence in terms of having a satisfying interaction, they also frequently described both positive occasions when the teacher's communicative skills facilitated the flow of the conversation and negative instances when the communicative 'work' that they were expecting from the teacher did not occur. On one hand, as one student positively recounted:

そのときに私の意見を引き出すような質問をELIの先生がしてくれて、とても会話がしやすかった。 [That time the teacher asked questions that helped

me to express my opinion and it was easier to hold the conversation.]

On the other hand, however, out of a total of 34 responses to the question concerning the factors involved in unsatisfactory interactions, 11 separate students perceived a lack of communicative participation on the part of the teacher as being a key factor. This perceived lack of participation was described in some cases as:

何を質問しても返事がそっけなかったとき。[No matter what questions I asked, the response was curt]

先生が話しにあまり乗ってくれなかった時。[When the teacher did not really join in the conversation] (lit. When the teacher did not really ride the conversation)

先生と話題が合わなくて、反応がいまいちで、会話が止まってしまった時。[When the topic did not suit the teacher, there was a lack of response and the conversation stopped]

The teacher did not talk so much. She asked something, so just I talked and she listened. It was boring.

Of course, given that teachers varied in terms of how much conversational floor they expected the student to occupy and the fact that many saw the practice centre as a place in which students could practice their speaking (as opposed to listening skills), what the students quoted above identified as a lack of communicative work on the part of the teacher could actually have been cases in

which the teacher was performing the role he or she felt was expected of them. If this was indeed the case, we can see how a mismatch in terms of expected roles can have a bearing on the extent to which one party evaluates the level of satisfaction taken from the encounter. In addition, the third example might illustrate the direct consequences of a poorly matched topic for one of the interlocutors: the conversation breaks down. Nevertheless, these perspectives from the students serve to remind us that the level of communicative collaboration brought to an interaction by teachers within such settings cannot necessarily be taken for granted.

### *Preparation*

There were several factors that were almost exclusively discussed by either teachers or students and tellingly not discussed by the other party. Teachers overwhelmingly identified the extent to which the student had prepared as being a key indicator of the level of satisfaction. 10 out of the 15 teacher responses regarding satisfactory interactions mentioned preparedness on the part of the student. As one teacher emphatically put it, 'number one priority - student preparation'. Although exactly what such preparation entails was not always discussed in detail by the participants, the common features were prepared topics, questions and vocabulary, in addition to having a clear idea of what they wanted to achieve through the activity. This finding in itself is perhaps not surprising but the fact that only one out of 36 student responses on the same topic mentioned preparation as a positive factor indicates an inconsistency between teacher and learner beliefs. Indeed, the student who did discuss it presented it as a behaviour that she or he had learned the importance of as part of an independent learner

training course offered at the university. As noted above, many students did clearly discuss some aspects of preparation as being one of their *roles*, and some students were clearly preparing well as teachers positively evaluated such factors. However, it seems as though they fail to make any clear connection between such activities and the satisfaction borne out of the interaction. Given that it was such a common factor for teachers, it would suggest that more needs to be done in terms of explicating the pedagogic reasoning behind the institutional inclusion of preparation in the student's role at the practice centre.

#### *Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation*

Another important emergent theme from the teacher data was the way in which high levels of intrinsic motivation ('They are there as they want to speak to us', 'students attend by choice') were positively evaluated and directly contrasted with extrinsically motivated use ('students are required to attend', 'the student is only doing it for an SJ [Speaking Journal]', 'students coming because they "have" to do speaking journal') which were very frequently negatively evaluated. As noted in the introduction to the context of the study, a large proportion of the students using the facility were doing so in order to complete conversation tasks assigned for outside of the classroom. Whilst teachers were apt to identify these as negative factors which constrained the interaction and made it feel 'more forced', the students who participated in the survey rarely discussed the interactional satisfaction in terms of their motivation. This may be because the students who participated in the survey were self-selecting and might be assumed to have high levels of intrinsic motivational orientation towards the PC. It might also be, however, that students understand the pedagogic value of the center and the

learning opportunity it presents regardless of whether they are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to participate there. In fact, when asked to recommend improvements to the centre, several students identified being required to visit the centre as a desirable policy:

1年生の必修の授業にプラクティスセンターでしかできないようなアクティビティーを入れるともっと認知度が上がると思う。 [If there are compulsory class activities in the first year which can only be completed at the Practice Centre, I think it would raise awareness about it.]

Making rule that students have to visit the Practice Centre once in a month/two months, especially Freshman.

It could be argued that what can be seen from this discussion of motivation is the complex process through which the sometimes vague and somewhat shifting constraints and affordances of language learning activities, intractable from the social world, can be difficult for the participants in the activity to negotiate. Early on in this paper, the PC was described as a complex space that was at once embedded in the domain of an educational institution whilst also being, to some extent, removed from the typical language classroom. This complexity seems at times to be difficult to navigate for both teachers and students as the exact nature of the interaction shifts. The teachers acknowledge that it serves as ‘the opportunity to engage in conversation with a native speaker in order to improve their spoken fluency’ and students appear to value it as such. However, the teachers also seemed to value the notion that students wanted, in a ‘genuine’ way, to come and speak to them as people rather than under the duress of a homework

task. Students however, engaged in the task of learning a second language, did not seem to care exactly where their motivation was coming from, even though this motivation may have been shaping the way in which they interacted with their partner in a negative fashion.

### *Affect*

In explaining the level of satisfaction engendered through the interaction, students adduced a number of factors that were grouped under the broad theme of affect. For students, the affective dimension of the conversation was often key to how they ultimately evaluated it and this often emerged through statements like the following:

楽しかった [I had fun]

会話中に何度も笑った [I laughed so many times during the conversation]

わからなかった点が理解でき、モヤモヤがなくなった。 [I could understand things that I couldn't before so my sad feelings lifted]

。。。 ショックでした [I was shocked]

日本人の私にとっては少し傷ついた経験でした。 [For me as a Japanese person, that was a slightly hurtful experience]

The student data was indeed littered with affective evaluations of their experiences in (perhaps predictably) stark contrast to the teacher data. Through the data it is clear that, emotionally speaking, this interaction is imbued with a high level of risk for the students. Not only did teachers rarely talk about their own emotions as

being factors in terms of satisfaction (perhaps as a consequence of their roles as professionals and expert-users of English), they also seldom considered the students' affective responses to the interaction as being important factors affecting satisfaction. This perhaps illustrates that, in approaching such interactions in a very professional manner, we may also be forgetting to consider the role that the affective dimension of experience plays, not only for students but also perhaps for teachers too.

### *Communicative Success*

Finally, a major emerging factor from the student data was perhaps the simplest too; satisfaction for them was often dependent on a simple case of whether they could communicate what they wanted to say or not to their partner in English. There were countless examples similar to the following:

自分の言いたい事が、ELIの先生に伝わったから。[I could communicate what I wanted to say to the ELI teacher]

And conversely:

一生懸命説明しているつもりでも、なかなか伝わらず、沈黙してしまったとき [When I thought I would be able to give a really good explanation but I really couldn't communicate it and the conversation fell silent]

This idea of being able to communicate one's thoughts, independent of complexity or originality of topic or sophistication of language, was evidently a strong indicator for students yet not really considered in the teacher data set. Once again, this is perhaps a product of the complexities of the PC as an undefined

interactional space. It is at once connected to the classroom whilst often being positioned in opposition to the classroom. It is a place for structured second language learning but it is also a place where the simple act of successful communication between two people can make the difference between satisfaction and non-satisfaction.

## **Conclusion**

This study has confirmed our understanding of the complex nature of practice centre interactions, and has indicated that it is in the mismatch of teacher and student assumptions and expectations of both purpose and role that the seed for miscommunication and dissatisfaction is sown. These differing expectations are not bad in and of themselves; teachers usually have coherent reasons for preferring to set up their PC sessions a certain way, and students benefit from the flexibility of using the centre to fulfil a number of functions, but the data suggests that there is a need to be aware of the difficulties that students have navigating the disparities between individual teachers' expectations, and of potential alternative standpoints. The problematic nature of this diversity of expectation was brought home to us by the following comment from a student:

先生によってプラクティスセンターは何をする場所なのかという考え方が違うようなので困った。 [Each teacher's idea of what the PC is for seems to be different, so I found myself in a pickle].

## ***Navigating expectations***

In order to resolve this issue and pave the way for more successful communications, this mismatch needs to be, if not completely aligned, then at least

highlighted. Previous belief studies which have compared teacher and learner beliefs have emphasised the importance of mutual awareness as a way to bridge this gap. Kern insists that active discussion of beliefs can "foster a reflective partnership between students and teachers (1995: 82) which can help to avoid potential obstacles, while Wan et al. (2011) found that making teachers aware of learner expectations of their role resulted in a positive change in teachers' stance.

These studies point to the fact that raising awareness of the findings of this research may help both students and teachers to align their expectations of Practice Centre interactions. This could be done in a number of ways, the simplest of which may be to provide clearer guidelines, informed by voices from this study, about what exactly is expected of both teachers and learners at the centre. Both teachers and students could benefit from having the affective dimension of the practice centre highlighted; if students could see the teacher more as an individual with specific interests and preferred interactional styles, who may have already have four conversations that morning about their winter vacation plans, and if teachers could be more aware of exactly how nervous some students are in interacting with a new teacher for the first time, a more satisfying experience could be had by both parties. This could be partly achieved by providing more information from teachers for students in short profiles about their interests and preferred interactional styles, for example: "I like soccer, movies and hip hop. Visit me at the practice centre if you prefer to get feedback on your language," resulting in more interactions in which teacher and learner expectations are more closely matched.

More interventionist options for students would include the development of

classroom activities in which students discuss their own expectations and experiences of the practice centre and are exposed to teacher voices, and possibly listen to or watch actual PC interactions and reflect on their outcomes. The student data suggests that many students would welcome such activities, especially those which helped them to prepare effectively. Teachers' attitudes in the data to initial or further training, however, were more ambiguous, with responses ranging from those who thought it "crucial", to those who said they would find it "tedious, and possibly even insulting."

Despite this rather hostile view, the data does suggest that all stakeholders of the practice centre could benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the complexities that have to be navigated, particularly by students, and the beliefs and assumptions that both parties bring to any practice centre interaction. This enhanced awareness, gained from conducting this study, is certainly something that we, in our capacity as practice centre teachers in addition to researchers, feel we have benefitted from in our own practice centre interactions.

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