

L2 Learner Perceptions of Creative Communicative Learning Tasks

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This study investigates the effectiveness of creative communicative learning tasks, created to supplement a reading textbook, on students' reading skills, communicative ability, and motivation. Science and Engineering students find it difficult to understand academic English readings. Therefore, the researcher developed content-based conversations to help students understand the content, improve their reading skills, and raise their motivation to learn English. After finishing the course, students' perceptions of these content-based conversations were investigated. Participants in the study were Science, Technology, and Engineering University students enrolled in 11 English language classes at the Kanazawa Institute of Technology (KIT). Results of the study indicated that these kinds of creative communicative learning tasks helped them understand the content and improved their reading skills.

Keywords: communicative, conversations, majors, motivation, non-English perceptions

1. Introduction

Many non-English major university students struggle to communicate in English although they possess basic vocabulary and grammar. This is likely because the focus of most non-English major classes is on the receptive skills (Webb, 2005)¹⁶ where students read academic texts, memorize vocabulary, and answer comprehension questions. To move from memorization to effective communication, learners need some kind of communicative practice, especially speaking practice (Spratt, 1999; Wood, 2002).¹⁵¹⁷

For non-English major students with low proficiency levels, controlled conversations are a potential solution. These controlled conversations can be created or adapted to facilitate conversation (Wood, 2002),¹⁷ to introduce and practice vocabulary, to give specific language practice (Doff, 1990),⁸ to provide listening practice, to offer natural and authentic language, to address students' needs and interests, and to reflect students' knowledge in the content.

In order to know the impact of these conversations on both students' language skills and their motivation, English language researchers and teachers need to investigate non-English major learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of these conversations. It is of crucial importance to know how students perceive their teachers' classroom activities, practices, techniques, and strategies. Based on their perceptions, teachers can better choose the techniques and practices to be used in the classroom.

However, while many teachers try to encourage communication in class, many students, especially non-English majors, still think that traditional teaching practices such as doing textbook exercises or answering comprehension worksheets are more effective when it comes to studying English at the college level (Al-Murtadha, 2012).¹ Non-English major university students tend to favor activities that only help them get good scores.

Interestingly, previous studies indicate that there are mismatches between teachers' and students' perceptions of the effectiveness of classroom activities. Two Australian studies found that some learners still prefer traditional learning styles (Nunan, 1989).¹³ Similarly, Bada and Okan (2000)⁹ argue that there are some learners who prefer the grammar-translation method to new communicative activities while most teachers consider communicative

activities more useful. Barkhuizen (1998)⁴ conducted a study in South Africa to investigate the usefulness and enjoyment of 15 classroom activities and found that students considered traditional classroom work more useful than recent communicative activities.

But this is not always the case. Some other studies on students' perceptions of the usefulness of classroom activities indicated that students' perceptions were affected by their proficiency levels. For example, Garret and Shortall (2002)⁹ investigated the perceptions of about 103 students in Brazil at both the elementary and intermediate levels and found that students at the elementary level considered teacher-centered grammar activities more useful than student-centered activities, while students at the intermediate level considered student-centered activities more useful and interesting. Yorio (1986)¹⁹ conducted a study at a Canadian university and found that elementary level students considered grammar explanations and vocabulary lists more useful than any other communicative activities. Spratt (1999)¹⁵, in a study of students at Hong Kong University, reported that students considered communicative activities more useful than traditional ones. Gower (1999)¹⁰ studied students' perceptions and views about classroom activities and found that intermediate students were less reluctant to participate in communicative activities such as group discussions.

The present study is an attempt to investigate Japanese non-English major university students' perceptions of content-based conversations prepared by the researcher to supplement a reading textbook. It is hypothesized that these content-based conversations will improve students' communicative ability more than reading skills. The study will test this hypothesis through comparing the effect of content-based conversations on students' speaking skills with their effect on improving students' reading skills and motivation.

2. Context of the Study

The participants were all engineering students taking required English courses at the Kanazawa Institute of Technology (KIT). One major problem these students have, according to the researcher's classroom observations, is lack of communicative ability. The researcher noticed that many students in his classes could not participate in communicative activities.

As a response to this problem, the researcher created content-based conversations to summarize and supplement the graded reading textbook taught to these students. And since it is of crucial importance to know how students perceived those content-based conversations, a survey was administered to non-English major university students in 11 English classes to assess their enjoyment and perceived value of the activity.

3. Instructional and Research Procedures

In order to help students understand the readings and improve their speaking skills, content-based conversations were created to supplement the reading textbook. The conversations combined the reading content with some useful daily expressions (Figure 1).

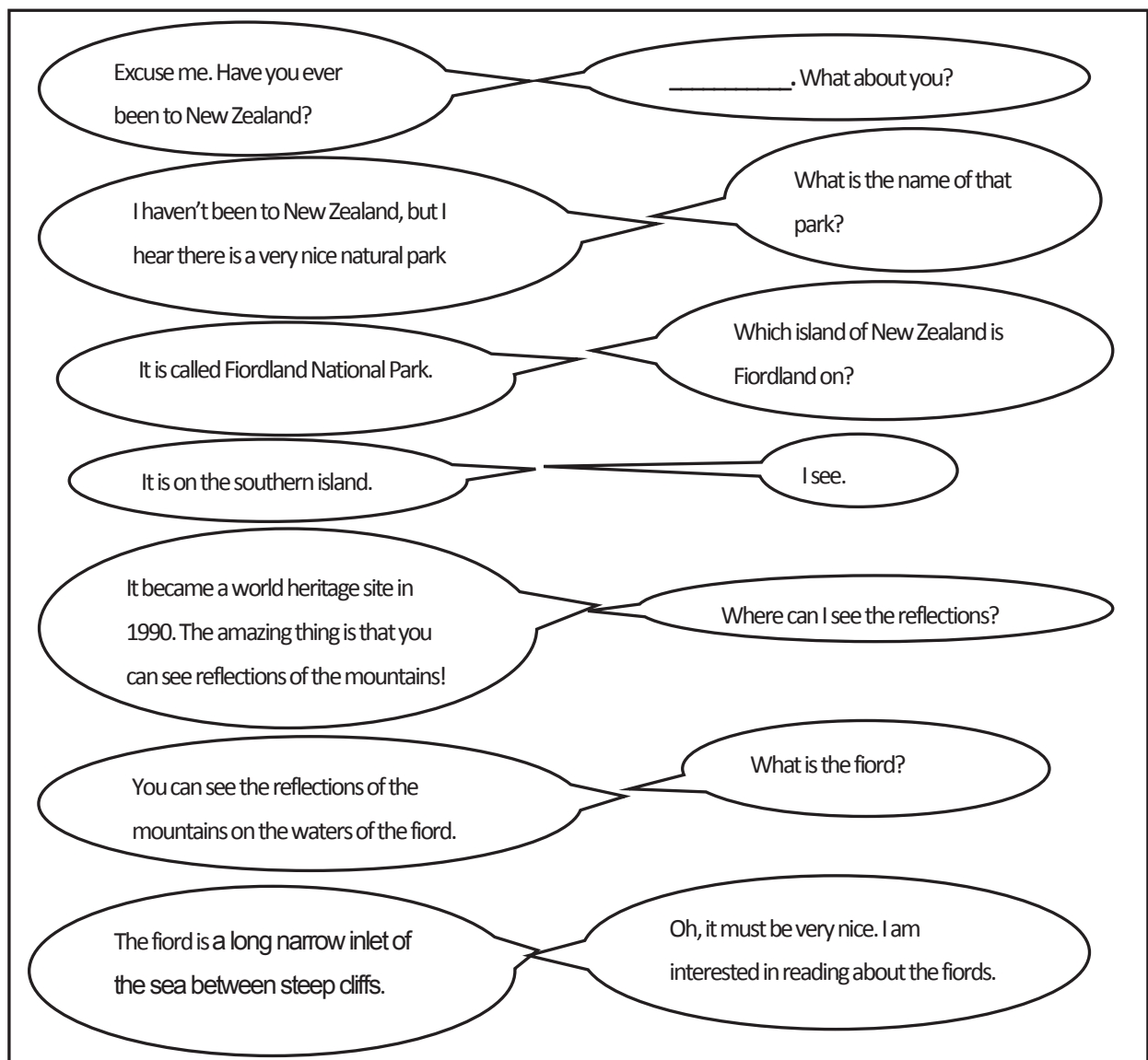


Figure 1. Learner perceptions of content-based conversations

First, students were given some time to check the meanings of new vocabulary, to skim and scan the conversations, and then to practice the conversations in pairs. They were then asked to stand and perform them in front of the class. Students were allowed to change any parts of the conversation while speaking in front of the class. Some conversations contained blanks and students were asked to fill in those blanks either from their own knowledge or from the textbook.

The aim was to get students to practice some useful expressions used in daily life and at the same time combine them with some information from the reading content. It was expected that students' communicative abilities would improve and reading would become easier after practicing these conversations.

4. Research Findings

In this study, KIT students' perceptions of content-based conversations were investigated. The study used a holistic scoring (Likert Scale): Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, and Disagree. Table 1 shows the numerical data:

Table 1: Learner perceptions of content-based conversations

	Items	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
Effect of content-based conversations on reading skills				
1	These conversations helped me understand the content of the reading text.	78%	17%	5%
2	These conversations improved my reading skills.	81%	14%	5%
Effect of conversations on communicative abilities				
3	These conversations improved my pronunciation.	66%	28%	6%
4	These conversations improved my speaking skills.	75%	21%	4%
Learner perception of the effect of content-based conversations on motivation				
5	I enjoyed practicing these conversations with a partner.	72%	23%	5%
6	These conversations motivated me to speak English.	63%	31%	6%

From the results of the survey, it seems that the content-based conversations have more perceived effect on the reading skills than on the communicative abilities or motivation. As Table 1 shows, most students thought that the content-based conversations prepared by the researcher improved their reading skills and helped them understand the content of academic readings more than improving their communicative ability or raising their motivation to learn English. The majority of students (81%) thought that the conversations improved their reading skills. It is probable that the summaries of the readings in the form of conversations made the content of the readings easier and therefore students felt that the conversations improved their reading skills. To understand the dialogues, students need some reading skills, such as scanning, skimming, or finding the meaning from the context of the conversations. It is likely that students used the context of the conversation to guess the meanings of the new vocabulary. It is also likely that the conversations seemed much easier to students than the readings in the textbooks and therefore students might have assumed some improvement in their reading skills had occurred. Also 78% stated that the conversations helped them understand the content of the readings. This positive rating is also higher than the positive ratings of the items in the communicative abilities and motivation sections.

The second section of the survey focused on the effect of content-based conversations on improving students' communicative abilities. 75% of the students thought these conversations improved their speaking skills and 66% of them believed that the conversations improved their pronunciation. These are lower positive ratings than the items in the first section of the survey.

The results of the third section in the survey that focused on students' motivation suggest that the conversations contributed positively to raising students' motivation to speak English. 72% of the students stated that they enjoyed practicing the conversations with their partners while 63% of them thought the conversations were

motivating. When it comes to motivation, many students seem to be externally motivated: to pass the course or to get good grades rather than to acquire communicative ability.

Table 1 also shows that a few students disagreed with the items in the survey. It is probable that these students are those who felt shy in the class and preferred not to participate in communicative activities. Also since students answered the survey after they received their final grades, it is possible that those who failed the course disagreed with the items. This is something to be taken into consideration in future research.

5. Limitations and Further Research

Action research has some limitations. The first limitation in this study is that all the participants were from a single university and were not randomly selected, so the data collected only represent this institution. The second limitation is that although the aim of action research is to answer questions or solve problems that occur in the classroom, findings of action research may or may not fit other groups of students even within the same institution, depending on the circumstances. The third limitation is methodological in nature; that is, this study used a questionnaire to elicit the findings, and elicited responses might be questionable since some participants might have answered the questions untruthfully or carelessly. The fourth limitation is that this study did not include face-to-face interviews to get students' comments about the effectiveness of classroom activities. Further research that elicits written and spoken responses is needed for further informative results.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated non-English major university students' perceptions of the effectiveness of content-based conversations. Most students thought the conversations improved their reading skills and helped them understand the content. The study recommends the use of such conversations in non-English major classes in general and at KIT in particular. Students seem to focus on the content of the readings itself, so activities that help them understand the content are preferred by many non-English major students.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Justin Whittinghill, Hung Nguyen, and Huang Chuanning for proofreading this paper. I would also like to thank all my students who participated in this study and all EEC members for their encouragement and support.

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[受理 平成 25 年 9 月 25 日]



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