

Introducing Reaction Phrases to be an Active Listener

Katsuichiro "Ken" Ohashi

ABSTRACT

Verbally reacting to what speakers say is considered an important communication skill in a discussion at the English Discussion Course (EDC) at Rikkyo University. Important as this still may be, verbal reactions are not discretely taught as an official communication skill, such as *agreeing and disagreeing* or *asking follow-up questions*, within the course. This project takes a look at two methods of introducing reaction phrases during the lessons based on a hypothesis that if they are introduced, students might give more reactions toward what other speakers say. Two methods were trialed as an attempt to identify a better method. A suggestion for future research is also made based on the findings.

INTRODUCTION

When learning to speak in a second language, it is not rare for the learner to feel vulnerable. This sense of vulnerability can be the result of the learner's actual ability to communicate in a second language not being able to match that of their ideal *L2 self* (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009). Closely related to the concept of the *L2 self* is the concept, *willingness to communicate*, which MacIntyre et al. (2001) define as "the intention to initiate communication, given a choice" (p. 396). When Brown (2007) introduces this concept as one of twelve teaching principals that can act as important foundations for teaching practice, he mentions that "risk-taking" (p. 73), which is related to this concept, is something needed both productively and receptively. Verbal reactions from the listener can provide speakers with some feel of comfort and reassurance. This feel of security may work favorably for the speaker, enhancing their willingness to communicate.

Dörnyei and Thurrell (1994) include "reacting in various ways to what a conversation partner is saying" (p. 45) as a typical language function that has been included and taught in contemporary textbooks. While valuing verbal reactions as important, it has not been given a place on the syllabus at EDC to be taught as an independent communication skill, such as agreeing and disagreeing or asking follow-up questions. Decisions to teach reactions, as well as what phrases to teach, are at each instructor's discretion.

CONTEXT

When speaking in Japanese, it is not uncommon to find students at EDC giving verbal reactions to each other while talking in dyads or in groups. Unfortunately, some of the same students do not give reactions when speaking in English. Some may be feeling anxious and not realize that they are not reacting. Some may just be naturally reserved and not react even in Japanese. And then, some may want to react but are not aware of any verbal reaction phrases in English, making them incapable of this act. The type of learners targeted for this project is students that tend to not give verbal reactions during EDC peer discussions. Two methods for introducing reaction phrases were trialed and compared to see if either was more effective than the other. The number of verbal reactions given by the participants before and after being exposed to the treatments was compared to confirm if introducing reaction phrases during class increased verbal reactions at all.

Treatment 1 (T1) exposed students to some reaction phrases that can be used for two different situations. For each situation, three phrases were provided for a total of six new phrases a week. Treatment 2 (T2) exposed the students to a table of fifteen function phrases that could be

grouped for three different situations.

TASKS AND MATERIALS

For T1, cards with reaction phrases for two specific purposes were prepared every week with three phrases being introduced for each type of reaction (Appendix A). Enough cards were prepared for each student every week so students could have one in front of them for the duration of each lesson. Fluency question cards were prepared as well (Appendix B).

T2 required a card with a table of reaction phrases that were introduced in the textbook. Since there were only thirteen phrases in the textbook, the phrases “I’m sorry to hear that” and “Well...” were added to fill the empty blanks on the chart to provide the students with fifteen phrases in total (Appendix C). These two phrases were chosen since the chart in the textbook included five phrases for *showing understanding*, five phrases for *showing surprise* and only three phrases for *reacting to bad news*. Enough cards for each student were prepared so all students could have one in front of them for the duration of each lesson. Fluency question cards were prepared as well (Appendix B).

Data for this project was collected during the three discussion tests (DTs) of the semester. The standard DT scoring sheets were used for this project’s purpose.

PROCEDURE

The fourteen-lesson semester was divided into three sections of four lessons each (table 1). Lessons 1 and 14 were excluded since they follow a different structure. Every class was placed in either Group A or Group B to undertake treatments in different order. Each treatment was introduced during the first three lessons of each section. The data used to compare the effectiveness of each treatment was collected during the last lessons of each section, which were also the DTs for this course.

Table 1

Project Schedule		
Section	Group A	Group B
1. Lessons 2-5	T0	T0
2. Lessons 6-9	T1	T2
3. Lessons 10-13	T2	T1

*T= Treatment

Section 1 was used to obtain a benchmark score for all the students. No special treatment was introduced during this period, but for comparative reasons this non-existent treatment will be called Treatment 0 (T0). In section 2 Group A was exposed to T1 and Group B was exposed to T2 and the treatments were reversed in Section 3. The procedures for T1 and T2 are described below.

Treatment 1

For an eight-student class, students were seated in two groups of four. The students in the group designated as the speakers for the first round of 3-2-1 (Nation, 2009) were given cards with the fluency questions for that lesson on them (Appendix B) and instructed to think of what they were going to say in their monologue. The students in the listener group are given two sets of phrases on a card (Appendix A). The instructor gave a brief explanation of when these phrases can be used then had the students say each phrase once in a *repeat after the instructor* manner. Following this, the instructor shared a short story containing a few short sentences, pausing after each sentence, so the students could practice reacting to some actual content (Appendix D).

After this, all students were instructed to take the card they were given and make two lines

at the front of the classroom, one being all speakers and the other being all listeners. When the first set of speakers finish their speaking turns, the students were instructed to swap the card they have with the student standing in front of them so the new speakers would have the fluency question cards and the new listeners would have the reaction cards. The new listeners were gathered at a different corner of the room to practice the reaction phrases like the first group of listeners while the new speakers gave thought to what they would say during their speaking turn. The 3-2-1 activity is repeated with students in their new roles.

When the 3-2-1 activity is finished the question cards (Appendix B) are swapped with reaction phrase cards (Appendix A) from the teacher so all the students have separate reaction cards with the same content on them. The students are encouraged to use the reaction phrases on the cards throughout the entire lesson as well as any other reaction phrases they may already know. The cards are referred to during feedback when applicable.

Treatment 2

The procedures for T2 were basically the same as T1. The only difference is how the reaction phrases on the reaction cards were practiced (Appendix C). In the first lesson of each section, the five phrases in the left column were emphasized and a repeat after the instructor practice was conducted. The second lesson focused on the middle column and the third lesson on the right column. Even though a repeat after the instructor was conducted with only a third of the phrases, the students were encouraged to use any one of the phrases on the card as well as any other phrase they may know. All the students had separate cards they could look at during the remaining time of the lesson, as did the students exposed to T1.

Data Collection

EDC DTs were used for data collection to measure the effectiveness of each treatment. The default test scoring sheets were used to count the number of reactions each student gave. The reactions students gave were categorized into two groups; *content reactions* and *permission reactions*. Content reactions were reactions toward the content of what another speaker shared and permission reactions were reactions toward questions for *turn taking* and *changing topics*. To differentiate the two on the test score sheet, content reactions were recorded by slashing the check box from top left to bottom right and permission reactions from top right to bottom left.

FINDINGS

Participants

The participants of this project were all the students that attended the instructor’s lesson during the fall semester of 2013. Data was collected from the students that were present at each DT; 83 participants for DT 1, 83 for DT 2, and 85 for DT 3. The number of participants per level is as shown in table 2. Participants who were in periods 1 and 3 were placed in Group A and the second period participants in Group B.

Table 2

DT	Participants							
	Group A				Group B			
	Lv 2	Lv 3	Lv 4	Total	Lv 2	Lv 3	Lv 4	Total
1	12	27	9	48	5	23	7	35
2	12	29	8	49	5	22	7	34
2	12	31	8	51	5	22	7	34
Total	36	87	25	148	15	67	21	104

*DT=Discussion Test, Lv= Level

Analysis

The aim of this project was to confirm if either of the treatments introduced would increase the number of reactions given by the participants during DTs, as well as identify which treatment could be more effective. The number of content reactions and permission reactions were recorded then processed on PASW Statistics 18. A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to see if there were any statistically significant differences between the three DTs (table 3), treatments (table 4), and class levels (table 5).

The difference in number of content reactions given per DTs was statistically significant overall ($F(2,248)=3.308, p=0.038$), however the effect size was small at 0.026. Post hoc Tukey between all three DTs showed that on average participants gave 1.207 more content reactions in DT2 than in DT3 ($p=0.030$). The difference in number of permission reactions per DTs was statistically significant overall ($F(2,248)=4.772, p=0.009$), however the effect size was small at 0.037. Post hoc Tukey between all three DTs showed that on average that participants gave more permission reactions in DT2 than the other two DTs ($p=0.025$ minimum).

Table 3

		Descriptives for ANOVA Between Discussion Tests							
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Number of Content Reactions	DT 1	83	4.83	3.076	.338	4.16	5.50	0	13
	DT 2	83	5.31	3.393	.372	4.57	6.05	0	14
	DT 3	85	4.11	2.695	.292	3.52	4.69	0	13
	Total	251	4.75	3.093	.195	4.36	5.13	0	14
Number of Permission Reactions	DT 1	83	3.95	2.295	.252	3.45	4.45	0	14
	DT 2	83	3.13	1.873	.206	2.72	3.54	0	8
	DT 3	85	3.98	1.826	.198	3.58	4.37	0	10
	Total	251	3.69	2.037	.129	3.44	3.94	0	14

The results displayed no statistically significant difference for the number of content reactions ($F(2,248)=0.082$, $p=0.431$) or permission reactions ($F(2,248)=1.150$, $p=0.318$) that were given by the participants after being exposed to either T1 or T2.

Table 4

		Descriptives for ANOVA Between Treatments							
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Number of Content Reactions	T0	83	4.83	3.076	.338	4.16	5.50	0	13
	T1	83	4.40	3.208	.352	3.70	5.10	0	13
	T2	85	5.00	3.000	.325	4.35	5.65	0	14
	Total	251	4.75	3.093	.195	4.36	5.13	0	14
Number of Permission Reactions	T0	83	3.95	2.295	.252	3.45	4.45	0	14
	T1	83	3.48	1.909	.210	3.07	3.90	0	8
	T2	85	3.64	1.883	.204	3.23	4.04	0	10
	Total	251	3.69	2.037	.129	3.44	3.94	0	14

The results displayed statistically significant differences for the number of content reactions given between class levels ($F(2,248)=4.823$, $p=0.009$), however the effect size was small at 0.037. Post hoc Tukey between all three levels showed that on average the participants in level 3 gave 1.584 more content reactions than participants in level 4 ($p=0.006$). For permission reactions, the results displayed statistically significant difference for the number of permission reactions given between class levels as well ($F(2,248)=3.544$, $p=0.030$), however the effect size was small at 0.028. Post hoc Tukey between all three levels showed that on average that participants in level 3 gave 0.811 more permission reactions compared to participants in level 2 ($p=0.036$).

Table 5

		Descriptives for ANOVA Between levels							
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Number of Content Reactions	Lv 2	51	4.84	2.942	.412	4.02	5.67	0	10
	Lv 3	154	5.08	3.258	.263	4.57	5.60	0	14
	Lv 4	46	3.50	2.336	.344	2.81	4.19	0	11
	Total	251	4.75	3.093	.195	4.36	5.13	0	14
Number of Permission Reactions	Lv 2	51	3.14	1.833	.257	2.62	3.65	0	8
	Lv 3	154	3.95	2.147	.173	3.61	4.29	0	14
	Lv 4	46	3.43	1.734	.256	2.92	3.95	1	8
	Total	251	3.69	2.037	.129	3.44	3.94	0	14

INTERPRETATION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The hypothesis was that if the students were discretely taught reaction phrases during the lessons it would improve the number of reactions they gave during discussions. Since there was no consistent increase in the number of reactions being given, whether they are content reactions or permission reactions, between DTs it seems as though this is not the case. A comparison between the number of reactions after the participants were exposed to different treatments show that neither of the treatments had a more positive effect than the other.

Comparing the number of reactions the participants gave between different class levels identified something interesting. Level 3 students gave more content reactions than those in level 2 and level 4. The difference between level 3 and 4 was at a statistically significant level. For permission reactions, level 3 participants also gave more than those in levels 2 and 4. The difference between level 2 and 3 was at a statistically significant level.

These results suggest that students in different levels behave differently when speaking in English. There may be a need to give a different type of attention to students in each level when introducing reaction phrases during class. Level 4 students not giving as many content reactions compared to level 3 students could be suggesting that the level 4 students are not confident at this act, which can also be affecting their willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 2001). It may also be suggesting that they cannot retain the reaction phrases that they are being taught due to the anxiety they are experiencing during class. Level 2 students giving less permission reactions than level 3 students can be suggesting that level 2 students do not ask turn taking questions or changing topic questions as much, to begin with. Having a high understanding of the English language, they may be feeling confident enough to share their ideas voluntarily without asking their peers for permission to speak, beforehand.

Another way to look at these results is that the level 3 students are over using verbal reactions during their discussions to a point where the reactions become a programmed routine, which can make the use of reactions artificial and the discussions unnatural. There may be a need to look at not just the number of reactions given by each student, but the number of reactions within each speaking turn and take a closer look at how and when the reactions are being given, to fully understand how students are using reactions within a discussion so an effective method of teaching reaction phrases can be identified.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Materials for Treatment 1

Group A: Lesson 6 / Group B: Lesson 10

Showing Understanding	Showing Surprise
I see [I] got it Interesting	Wow! Really? No way!

Group A: Lesson 7 / Group B: Lesson 11

Reacting to good news	Reacting to bad news
Nice! That’s good/great. Excellent.	Oh, no! That’s too bad. I’m sorry to hear that.

Group A: Lesson 8 / Group B: Lesson 12

Reactions of Agreement	Reactions of Disagreement
I know. Right. Sure.	Well... I don’t know... I’m not sure...

Appendix B: Fluency question cards for both Treatment 1 and Treatment 2

Lesson 6

1. What TV shows did you like when you were a child?
2. What TC shows do you like now?

Lesson 7

1. Which celebrities do you like (e.g. from TV, sports, movies, music)?
2. Which celebrities don’t you like (e.g. from TV, sports, movies, music)?

Lesson 8

1. What is your favorite manga or anime?
2. What is your favorite Japanese singer or group?

New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion

Lesson 10

1. What school rules did you have? Did you follow them?
2. What ruled did you have at home? Did you follow them?

Lesson 11

1. Is your hometown a safe place to live?
2. Do you think crime is a big problem in Japan?

Lesson 12

1. Do men and women have the same hobbies and interests?
2. Do men and women have the same strengths and weaknesses?

Appendix C: Materials for Treatment 2

Group A: Lessons 10-12 / Group B: Lessons 6-8

Reactions		
Okay	Really?	Oh no!
I see.	That's interesting.	Poor you!
Right.	That's great!	That's too bad!
Uh-huh.	That's amazing!	I'm sorry to hear that.
Yeah.	Wow!	Well...

Appendix D: Example of Short Story

My favorite actress is Yuko Takeuchi. I think she is very beautiful. I met her at the airport last week. She was kind enough to shake my hand.