

A Survey of Student Attitudes to Unstructured Learner Interaction

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Introduction

The concept of Unstructured Learner Interaction (interaction between learners in the target language outside the classroom when no teacher is present) has received very little attention from SLA researchers. In addition, several writers have highlighted a lack of longitudinal studies of the effect of learner interaction on SLA (e.g., Long 1985, Pica 1987). There are many practical reasons for this apparent gap in the research, one of which is the probability of a high rate of decay among volunteers. The purpose of this study was to investigate ways in which future projects could be set up so as to maximize the chances of as many learners as possible sustaining their efforts to use English outside the classroom before attempting to measure directly any effects on proficiency. (Proficiency is used here in the sense of its definition in Richards et al. (2010): “a person's skill in using a language for a specific purpose” (p. 204).)

The aim of this study was therefore to assemble a large group of volunteers who had expressed interest in trying a new way of developing their English skills, survey them to find out more about their motivation and beliefs regarding the effectiveness of ULI, and then follow their progress as they tried to use English with each other outside the classroom. The plan was to collect data through diaries written by the participants, through individual and group interviews, and from the researcher's observations of students during project meetings. The main goals of Study 1 were therefore:

- 1) To assess the degree to which students were able to adopt English as a means of communication outside the classroom
- 2) To identify factors that helped and/or hindered them in their efforts
- 3) To find out if the students' experiences suggested anything about ways in which teachers could actively promote ULI within an educational institution
- 4) To investigate the usefulness of the data-gathering and analysis techniques and identify the most promising avenue(s) for further research

Participants

The Study was conducted at Nanzan University, a private Catholic university in Nagoya, Japan's third largest city. The university has seven undergraduate faculties, six of which have either an arts or social-science base. Around 20,000 high school students take the entrance examinations for Nanzan University every year, but only around 2,200 of those are accepted, so the university is classed as being at the upper end of the scale of private universities in central Japan.

Recruiting Volunteers

Having obtained permission from all the teachers in the targeted departments, I visited each of the classes and explained that I was recruiting volunteers for an English research project to investigate a new way of developing language skills. I left copies of a poster inviting anyone who was interested to come to an orientation meeting. My explanation at this point took only about two minutes, and I was careful to say the same thing to every class.

An encouragingly large number of students (more than seventy) attended the orientation meeting, which was conducted in Japanese. I told the students that learners of foreign languages I had known in my own university days had developed their fluency by using the target language with each other outside the classroom, but that I had rarely seen or heard of any university students in Japan doing this with English. I explained that the aim of the research project was to find out what happens when students at a Japanese university make a concerted effort to use English with each other outside the classroom. I reminded students that participation in the project was voluntary and entirely unconnected with their grades in regular English classes.

Students were told that those who volunteered would be asked to complete a survey to help me to find out more about their beliefs about using English with other learners outside the classroom, keep a diary of their progress as they tried to use English with their friends, and attend at least one project meeting a week. The plan at this stage was that two weekly meeting times would be set, and that all volunteers should be able in principle to attend at least one of them on a regular basis. At the end of this meeting, I asked students who were interested in taking part in this project to email me.

Over the course of the next week, I received many expressions of interest, and by the end of the week, eighty students were registered as participants. I presumed that the reason this number was larger than the number of students who had come to the initial orientation was simply that they had been unable to attend on that day, but it later became clear that very keen students had been persuading less enthusiastic friends to join in so that they would have someone to talk to. I was, however, unaware of this at the beginning of the project.

Of the eighty students who volunteered, 59 were female and 21 were male. Given that the total size of the recruitment pool was only around 400 students, and also given that English was not their major area of study, this was a surprisingly large number. The fact that I had really done nothing beyond explain that I wanted them to use English outside the classroom suggested to me that the reason students do not generally do this has more to do with awareness than negative attitudes to the concept. Once the list of participants had been drawn up, the next stage was to create a questionnaire to find out about their experience of and motivation for learning English as well as their attitudes to the idea of using English with other learners outside the classroom in the university environment. The procedure for doing this is described in the following section.

Designing the Questionnaire

At the beginning of the study, I wanted to gather as much information as possible about (a) the learning experiences and ability levels of the students who volunteered to take part, (b) their motivation for learning English, (c) their beliefs about the efficacy of interacting with their peers in English, and (d) the degree to which they were concerned about affective factors such as the opinions of other students who were not participating in the project. My rationale for gathering this information at the outset was that I wanted to:

- * Find out whether there appeared to be any characteristics that distinguished students more likely to volunteer for the project (e.g. they had a high level of English to start with; they had experience of living overseas; they held strong beliefs about the efficacy of ULI, etc.)
- * Establish a database that could be examined after the completion of the project to find out whether students who remained highly motivated throughout differed in any respects in terms of their initial experience and/or beliefs to those who dropped out.
- * Establish a record of students' beliefs and attitudes before engaging in ULI so that any changes resulting from their experiences could be identified.

A questionnaire was chosen as the most appropriate means of gathering this data because, as Dornyei (2003) put it, questionnaires are “uniquely capable of gathering a large amount of information quickly in a form that is readily processable” (p. 1). Given the number of students who initially volunteered for the study and the logistical difficulties of gaining the information I needed through other means such as interviews, I decided that a questionnaire was the only realistic option for gathering the data I needed.

As a starting point for constructing the questionnaire, I followed the recommendations of Dornyei (2003) and Brown (2001) regarding basic instrument design. These recommendations covered issues such as the length of the survey, the wording of questions, and the combination of question types. The first draft of the questionnaire began with a short explanation of the aims of the project and comprised four sections focusing on English level and experience, beliefs about the usefulness of NNS/NNS interaction as a way of developing language proficiency, motivation, and affective factors. The questions themselves were a mixture of open-ended and closed items with the closed items based on a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was constructed in English and translated into Japanese later.

Section 1 of the questionnaire was designed to gather data about the levels of the students through a combination of standardised test scores, English class levels, and self-analysis. Participants were also asked about their experience of travel and language learning to establish which of them had been exposed to English outside the Japanese education system. The first five items asked whether the students had taken any standardized English tests. As these learners had already been streamed according to the results of a standard test at our university, students were also asked to say which class they had been placed in. In the first draft of the questionnaire, this was followed by a self-analysis of

ability in the four main skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

The second section of the questionnaire aimed to gather data on the participants' motivation for studying English. Following Dornyei's (2001) guidelines for investigating motivation, I originally constructed 10 items to cover the following areas:

- * Feelings towards the L2 and L2 culture group
- * The presence or absence of specific intrinsic goals
- * The presence or absence of specific extrinsic goals
- * Feelings about the likelihood of success
- * Feelings about the English programme, the English teachers, and the learning environment.

This number later had to be halved because of a lack of space, but items were still included to check for both intrinsic and extrinsic influences on motivation.

The third section of the questionnaire focused on students' beliefs about the efficacy of interacting in the target language with other Japanese people. The wording of the items was adapted from comments made by students I have taught in the past. I was particularly interested to find out how many students had ever considered using English with each other outside the classroom to improve their fluency, and I also wanted to know how many students had been encouraged to do this by their teachers. Items were included that asked how students viewed the relative benefits of using English with different kinds of partners. In particular, I was interested to find out how students viewed different combinations of English ability and nationality in terms of their effect on the usefulness to them of talking to that person. Further items were based on reasons I have frequently heard students give for doubting the effectiveness of using English with other learners outside the classroom. I was interested to find out to what degree the participants in this study held the same beliefs. The final item asked students their opinion about why learners generally do not use English outside the classroom with each other in Japan.

My previous experience had suggested that affective factors are a major stumbling block for students who try to use English outside the classroom, so the fourth section of the questionnaire was designed to assess the degree to which these were likely to influence the participants. As with the previous sections, I was interested to see whether there was any clear "type" among the students who volunteered for this project, but I was even more interested to establish baseline data in order to find out whether the effect of these factors would become more or less important over the course of the project. Students who have been successful in their attempts at using English outside the classroom in Japan have told me in the past that "It feels weird at first, but you soon get used to it." I therefore wanted to have information on how students felt at the beginning of the study so that I could later ask them about their reflections on how their feelings had changed.

Revising the Questionnaire

It immediately became apparent that the first draft of the questionnaire was far too long. Dornyei (2003) recommended a four-page limit for questionnaires, but the first draft of this questionnaire was more than eight pages long. I decided as a first step to eliminate

the self-analysis for reading and writing, but I quickly realized that this whole section would have to be cut. I was not keen to do this because I wanted information not only about the students' levels, but also about their perception of their own level. Unfortunately, however, it was simply not going to be possible to get all the information I wanted from one questionnaire. At this point, I sought advice from a colleague who gave me a great deal of useful feedback on the design and layout of the items. After several re-writes, I decided on the final version of the questionnaire.

Translating the Questionnaire

The original version of the questionnaire was written in English, but the version given to the students was in Japanese. In order to check the accuracy of the translation, I made one version of the Japanese questionnaire while a Japanese colleague worked independently to produce another one from the same English original. The versions were compared, and any items where we had differed were discussed.

Administering the Questionnaire

After compiling the name list, I sent emails asking the participants to attend another meeting where I would ask them to complete the survey and explain to them how I wanted them to structure their diary entries. This meeting was held before the students had officially begun their attempts to use English outside the classroom, but some students had started already by themselves.

The meeting was held during a lunch break, and students were given as long as they needed to finish the questionnaire. Most were able to complete it in about twenty minutes, but a few took it away and returned it to me later. Several students who had volunteered were not present at that meeting, but I was able to find at least some of them and administer the questionnaire later that week. Not all the students who had signed up for the project actually decided to take part. I was able to collect questionnaire data from a total of fifty-one students, twenty of whom were male and thirty-one female, which was significantly lower than the number of students who had volunteered to take part in the project. However, several students were unable to attend on the day the survey was administered but contacted me to express their interest in continuing with the study. Dornyei (2003) suggested that fifty (+/- 20) responses should normally be sufficient to provide a meaningful analysis of an instrument, so I was confident that the results of the survey would help me to refine the questionnaire (if it became necessary to do so) for later parts of the study.

Although the instrument was originally composed using the Microsoft Word program, it was later reconstructed using SphinxSurvey Plus 2 (Version 5). This software allows users to create professionally formatted questionnaire instruments by selecting question types from a pull-down menu and then simply typing in the questions. It also speeds up the process of inputting data by providing an interface that presents all the options for each question

Results

Presentation of Results

Data obtained from items based on five-point Likert scales is explained below because the distributions of responses were clearly not normal (in the statistical sense of a “normal” distribution), so descriptive statistics would have been misleading. Some of the responses to open-ended items were written in Japanese. Those were translated by me, and a sample was checked by a Japanese colleague.

Section 1 – English-Learning Experience

The first five items in Section 1 asked students to give details of any standardized tests of English proficiency that they had taken. Unfortunately, these items proved to be of little value in assessing the proficiency of the students as only 15% of the respondents (eight students) had taken the TOEIC test and none of the students had taken the TOEFL test. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents (thirty-six students) had taken the STEP test, a standard test of English proficiency commonly used in Japan where “pre-third” is the lowest level, and “first” the highest. The figures for class placement showed that four of the students were in the “advanced” level, forty were in the “regular” level, and eight were in the “basic” level.

The remaining questions in Section 1 showed that approximately one third (eighteen) of the students had attended an English conversation school, and approximately 40% (thirty-one of the students) had been abroad. Of these, 29% (fifteen students) had been on short vacations, and only 10% (five students) had experience of short-term study abroad programmes.

Discussion of Results from Section 1

The breakdown of the participants' proficiency levels according to their class was not surprising. At the time, there were a total of six different classes in the regular level and only one class in each of the advanced and basic levels of the general English programme. In other words, the profile of the sample closely reflected the profile of the population, meaning that there did not appear to be anything remarkable (at least in terms of proficiency) about the students who volunteered to take part in this project.

I had speculated that students' level of English and their experiences of learning it outside the school environment would play a large role in determining who would volunteer to take part in the project, but after meeting and talking to all the participants, it seemed that students who chose to take part did so for one of three main reasons:

- * They were in one of my classes.
- * They had friends who were in my class and were persuaded by them to join.
- * Their teacher strongly encouraged them to take part. (One other teacher was particularly enthusiastic, and many of his students volunteered to take part.)

These factors apparently far outweighed any other considerations, an interesting point to note in a study of how to persuade Japanese university students to try using English outside the classroom. The lack of useful data obtained from this section, combined with

the informal feedback received from the participants, suggested that questions regarding English level need not be included in future studies conducted in this environment. The questions about English conversation school and travel abroad also failed to identify any noticeable patterns, suggesting that they too could be omitted from future studies.

Section 2 – Motivation to Study English

The highest scores were given in the categories “to improve career prospects” and “to go abroad.” Answers in the category “because it is a compulsory subject” are difficult to analyse because the question itself was confusing, a point which is addressed in the discussion below.

The final item in this section of the questionnaire asked respondents to mention any other reasons they had for studying English. There were fourteen responses to this item, and all were written in Japanese. In the majority of cases, students who added comments here did not mention other reasons for wanting to study English, but simply elaborated on their reasons for responding in the way they had to the previous question. There was a strong bias towards instrumental motives, and several students mentioned wanting to be able to speak to people from other countries and enhancing career prospects.

Discussion of Results from Section 2

The responses to the group of questions about reasons for studying English suggested that students were motivated by a range of factors, but significantly more students responded positively towards the questions about career goals and wanting to go abroad. This is exactly the kind of distribution that I would have expected among a group of students for whom English was not their major area of study. However, follow-up interviews conducted with a sample of respondents highlighted problems with the wording of one of the items: “I study English because it is a compulsory subject and I have to take it.” My intention here was to find out the degree to which students felt they were being forced to study English as opposed to doing it because they wanted to. Unfortunately, although some students interpreted this in the way I had intended, others not unreasonably decided that this item should be given a high score regardless of their feelings about studying English. Their rationale was that the fact that English was a compulsory subject was basically the main reason why they were studying at the moment, and that this was unrelated to the issue of whether they were interested in it or not. In future studies, it would be more useful to phrase an item like this in terms of how likely the students would be to take English classes if it became an elective subject. As it stands, however, the wording of the item meant that no conclusions can be drawn from the results.

The open-ended item at the end of this section produced a list of the kinds of reasons that, in my experience, young Japanese people generally give for wanting to learn English (I want to talk to people from other countries, I want to get a good TOEIC score, etc.), and so this too failed to identify any noticeable patterns among students who had volunteered to participate in the project. It therefore appears that students' reasons for learning English were less useful indicators of who would volunteer to take part in this project than the attitudes of their friends and the level of encouragement given by their teachers.

Section 3 – Beliefs Regarding the Effectiveness of NNS/NNS Interactions

The first item in this section asked students what they thought about the idea of Japanese people using English together. The most popular response was “it might be useful to some degree,” with 65% of respondents (thirty-four students) choosing that option. If these are combined with the “very useful” responses, approximately 83% (forty-three students) were positively disposed to the idea.

The second item offered students the opportunity to elaborate on their response to the previous question. This item produced forty-six comments, which were sorted using the survey software and examined according to the way in which each student had answered the previous question.

Four students had said in response to the previous question that they had never thought about using English with other Japanese learners. Two of these mentioned in their comments that they had always taken it for granted that foreign languages could only be learned by interacting with native speakers. There were also four comments from students who had said that they believed using English with other Japanese learners would not be useful. These students highlighted the inability of learners to correct each other and the danger of learning “incorrect” English.

Thirty-one students who had said that using English with other learners might be useful to some degree wrote comments. These were of three types: (a) responses that gave reasons for regarding this kind of language use as beneficial, (b) responses that gave reasons for its limitations, and (c) responses which mentioned both positive and negative aspects. The majority of the responses focused either on the positive points or listed both advantages and disadvantages. The most commonly noted negative themes were the idea that learners would pick up each other's mistakes and that it would be difficult to avoid reverting to Japanese. The most common theme among the positive comments was the idea that using English will help you to learn it regardless of who you are talking to. Several respondents expressed the opinion that using English with any kind of partner including other Japanese learners was better than not using it at all.

Item 24 asked respondents to assess the benefits of using English with different kinds of partners. The responses clearly showed that these students saw interaction with a native-speaking teacher of English as the most effective way of developing their proficiency. Using English with a Japanese person with a high level of English ability received a similar ranking to talking with a native speaker of English who is not a teacher, but slightly more students awarded a score of five to the native speaker. The next category in order of preference was non-native speakers from another country, and the category with the lowest rating was Japanese people with the same level of English. This was the only category in which the number of negative responses outweighed the positive ones.

Item 25 on the questionnaire asked students about their experience of using or trying to use English outside the classroom with another learner. A total of twenty people said that they had never thought about it, and a further thirteen said that they had thought about it but never tried it. Twelve students said that they had tried it but given up, and six said that they did it sometimes. Only one student claimed to do this regularly.

Item 26 asked whether students had been encouraged to use English outside the

classroom by their teachers. The responses were that thirty-two students said their teacher had never mentioned it, sixteen said that a teacher had suggested it to them at some point, three students said that they had been encouraged to do it many times, and only one said that their teacher really pushed this kind of practice.

Items 27 to 30 asked students to say how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statements below.

- * If Japanese students use English together, we will learn each other's mistakes.
- * The higher the level of your partner, the more beneficial the interaction.
- * When I make a mistake, I like to have it corrected there and then.
- * It is more useful to speak English with non-native speakers from other countries than with other Japanese learners.

The responses to the statement about learning each other's mistakes were skewed towards the negative end of the scale, with twenty-eight students indicating that they disagreed or strongly disagreed. The statement about interaction with higher level partners being more useful also showed a bias toward negative responses, with twenty-three students disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, and fifteen agreeing or strongly agreeing, which appears to contradict the finding shown in Figure 8 above that students expressed a strong preference for partners with a high level of English. Fourteen students indicated that they did not have strong feelings either way. The question about having mistakes corrected immediately showed the clearest response of all the items with thirty-eight students agreeing, and only fourteen expressing the opposite opinion. Eleven students did not have strong feelings either way. There was a general feeling that interaction with learners from other countries is more beneficial than interaction with other Japanese, with twenty-six students agreeing or strongly agreeing compared to only ten with negative views. This was the only item for which the three-point choice drew more responses than any other category, possibly because many of these students have no experience of interacting with learners from other countries.

Item 31 asked students to elaborate or express their own views about their responses to the previous question, but only six people wrote comments. Of these, three referred to the question about interacting with a learner from another country. The comments suggested that this would be preferable because learners from other countries have different weak points from Japanese learners, and you would have no choice but to stay in English. Two more of the comments referred to the worry about learning incorrect English and not being able to correct each other's mistakes. The final comment stated the respondent's view that learners should not worry too much about making mistakes.

Item 32 asked students for their thoughts on why learners in Japan generally do not try to use English with each other outside the classroom. The three modalities that drew the most responses were "because they have never thought about it" (thirty-four responses), "because they worry about what other people are thinking" (twenty-one responses), and "because it feels too strange" (twenty responses). The least popular responses were "because they don't think it is a good way to practise" and "because they are not really motivated to learn English," with only two positive responses for each.

The final item in this section asked students to list any other reason why Japanese students do not generally attempt to use English with each other that had not been mentioned in the item above. There were eleven responses. Five people mentioned the difficulty of finding people to interact with, and seven talked about the problems of not being able to converse because of their low level of English ability.

Discussion of Results from Section 3

The finding that 83% of students thought that ULI was useful to some degree was encouraging, but not entirely surprising given that these were all people who had volunteered to take part in a study of its effectiveness. It would be interesting to compare this figure with the results from a more general sample of the population. However, the question about the value of different types of practice partners showed clearly that most students regard interacting with other learners as a last resort when no other type of practice is available.

The responses to the open-ended item confirmed the suggestions of my previous study (Barker, 2004) that the main concerns of learners are their inability to correct each other and the dangers of learning each other's "incorrect" English. Given that evidence from SLA research is available that might help to assuage those concerns, making this case to students could be an effective way for teachers to make a significant difference to their attitude to ULI.

When asked about the benefits of using English with different kinds of partners, the respondents strongly favoured a native-speaking teacher of English compared with the other groups. Interestingly, there was little perceived difference between the benefits of using English with a native speaker who is not a teacher and using English with another Japanese person who has a high level of English. This may be because the learners are more concerned with the issue of proficiency than nationality, or it may be because the respondents felt that there are advantages and disadvantages to both. For example, I have heard students say in the past that the advantages of speaking to another Japanese person are that you can ask questions about things you do not know how to say in English. On the other hand, talking to a native speaker might be seen as more useful in terms of providing access to "real" English pronunciation. The responses to this question suggest that whatever the perceived advantages and disadvantages of these different kinds of practice partners are, these students seem to feel that they are roughly equal in terms of their value.

Responses to the question about using English with a Japanese person of a similar level are more difficult to interpret. If scores of four and five are combined and compared with the sum of one and two scores, this becomes the only category where more respondents felt that interaction with this kind of person was not useful. If all the scores are analyzed, however, it becomes clear that the most common response to this question was a three. This raises the question of whether the middle score was taken by respondents to mean "no strong feelings either way," or whether it was interpreted as meaning "a medium level of usefulness." For this reason, responses to this item would have been more informative if a four-point scale had been used.

Responses to item 25 showed that a clear majority of students had never thought about

using English with other learners outside the classroom, or had thought about it but never tried it. A problem with this question was that the survey was administered after the explanation of the aims of the project, so it is possible that some students were answering “never thought about it” meaning that they had never thought about it until recently and others were answering “thought about it but never tried it” purely on the basis that I had mentioned it to them the week before. The results would therefore have been easier to interpret if I had included “before you heard about this project” in the wording of the question. Even bearing in mind this limitation, however, it is clear that only a small minority of the students ever used English with other learners outside the classroom, and two students told me informally that they had answered “yes” in reference to attempts they had made since the initial explanation of the project. The one student who said that he did it often was a member of the university's English speech-making club and therefore often used English during club meetings. (This club would not have been a good example of ULI because its members only use English with each other in club meetings, which are generally run by one or two proficient students in a similar way to an English class, and the majority of their interaction relates purely to making, correcting, and delivering English speeches.)

Item 26 attempted to find out whether students had been encouraged to use English with each other outside the classroom by their teachers. Again, there was a serious problem with both the wording of this item and the timing of the administration of the questionnaire. The first problem was that it became clear from the follow-up interviews that some of the students thought they were being asked about teachers they had before they came to university, whilst others thought they were being asked about all the teachers they had ever had, including their present ones. The other issue was that some of these students were in my class and had been told repeatedly that they should be trying to use English with each other. All of these problems could have been avoided by more careful wording of the question. For example, if I had added “by any teacher including your present teachers but not including me,” the data would have been a lot more useful. Even taking these shortcomings into account, however, it is clear that very few teachers are suggesting ULI as a way for students to develop their language skills. Out of fifty-two responses, only four students indicated that they had been told to do this many times, and a check of the names revealed that they were the ones in my classes. It is also likely that most of the sixteen students who said that their teacher has suggested this were in at least one of my classes. If I am correct in my assumptions about the contamination from my own students, the results of this survey therefore suggest that teachers do not generally recommend that learners use English with each other outside the classroom as a way of developing their speaking skills.

Items 27 to 30 showed that generally, the feedback I have received from students in the past only partly applied to this group of learners. Unfortunately, this question suffered from a similar problem to some previous items in that it is difficult to say what learners perceive the middle score on a scale of five to represent. Logically, a “3” on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) signifies that the respondent neither agreed nor disagreed, but it would have been better to make this clearer by writing it on the

questionnaire. On reflection, it is possible that on a scale of “agreement” with 1 as the minimum and 5 as the maximum, some may have perceived “3” to represent mild agreement.

The desire of learners to have mistakes corrected as soon as possible and the preference for interacting with people from other countries were not surprising. Less expected were the responses to the questions about learning each other's mistakes and interacting with a higher-level partner. More than half of the respondents gave a score of one or two indicating disagreement with the statement that students using English together will pick up each other's mistakes. Only fifteen of the respondents indicated that they would prefer to interact with someone of a higher level than themselves. Item 31 was an open-ended question intended to elicit more information about responses to the previous group of questions, but only six students wrote comments. Again, there was mention of the worry about learning each other's mistakes, but it seems that this reservation was not shared by the majority of the learners. The feedback I have received from other students in the past had suggested that this is a major concern for all Japanese learners, so future studies will need to look at this issue in more depth. One student wrote that it is not good to worry too much about mistakes, something that has probably been drilled into these students in their classes with native-speaking teachers at our university. One possibility may therefore be that students were responding to this question by giving the answer they thought that I wanted to hear. Another possibility, of course, is that students who worried less about making mistakes were more likely to volunteer for this project.

The final two items in this section attempted to find out why students thought learners of English in Japan generally do not use English with each other outside the classroom. The most interesting findings here were that “because they have never thought about it” received over 25% more responses than any other reason, and that “because they don't think it is a good way to practise” was ticked by less than 4% of the respondents. This confirms a central hypothesis of this investigation of ULI, which is that learners would be much more likely to use English with each other outside the classroom if teachers made a serious effort to promote the idea.

The high number of responses to “because they worry about what other people are thinking” and “because it feels too strange” support the idea that affective factors will also play an important role in the promotion of ULI outside the classroom as a way of developing proficiency. The responses to the following open-ended item also clearly identified a factor which I should have included in the questionnaire ? the concern learners had that their level of English was simply not good enough to enable them to use it for real communication.

Section 4 – Affective Factors

Items 34 to 38 of the questionnaire focused on the influence of affective factors on the students' motivation to use English with each other outside the classroom. The individual factors that students were asked to respond to are listed below.

- * I worry about what people around me are thinking.
- * I feel very strange speaking English to another Japanese person.

- * I worry a lot about my mistakes when I use English.
- * I don't like speaking if there are others around who are better than me.
- * It's easier to use English if others are doing it too.

The strongest patterns were clear in items 36 (worrying about mistakes) and item 38 (it's easier if other people are doing it as well) with the majority of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing with these statements.

The final item on the survey asked students to mention anything else they wanted to say about how they felt when they were using English. There were eleven responses. Five of these made reference to feelings of frustration in not being able to say what they want to say. One student commented that they did not want to have to work so hard in conversations with friends. Several students mentioned feelings of embarrassment, and two of these made reference to comparing themselves to others.

Discussion of Results from Section 4

Based on previous feedback, I had expected to see a much higher level of importance attached to the question of worrying about what others were thinking. As noted above, caution must be exercised in interpreting the meaning of mid-point responses on a five-point scale, but if they are taken to mean that a student did not feel particularly strongly about that particular factor, it appears that twenty-two out of fifty-two students were not especially worried about the opinions of others. This is somewhat surprising in a culture where the importance of paying constant attention to the feelings of those around you is considered paramount, and it contradicts the opinions of Tani-Fukuchi (2005) regarding Japanese learners in general. This may signify one factor which distinguishes at least some of the volunteers in this group – they tended to be students who worried less about what others thought of them. This idea is supported by the similarly even distribution of the following question about “feeling strange,” which I had expected to draw significantly more positive responses.

The responses to the questions concerning worrying about mistakes and finding it easier to speak English if others were doing the same showed clearly that these were important factors for the majority of participants in this study. The second of these factors was particularly important, with all but five of the students regarding this as important or very important.

The question about not wanting to speak with people with better English drew a mixed response. I included this item because it was a major factor for me in my own language learning, and I had heard other learners say the same thing. The same point was also mentioned by Schmidt in Schmidt and Frota (1986). Evidence from the follow-up interviews (see below) suggested that learners who agreed with this looked at the problem in different ways: some did not want to talk in this situation because of a fear of looking stupid, but others did not want to talk for fear of being a burden on the more proficient speaker. These two elements would need to be separated in any future study. The comments made with regard to these answers showed that frustration at not being able to say what you want to say is also a key factor that needs to be taken into account.

Follow-Up Interviews

The advantage of using a questionnaire was that it enabled me to gather a wide range of data from a large number of students in a relatively short time. However, asking people to respond to a series of pre-set questions inevitably involves sacrificing some of the depth that might be gained from speaking to each individual about their beliefs and experiences. As Richards (2009) put it, speaking directly with individuals “can provide insights into people's experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and motivations at a depth that is not possible with questionnaires” (p. 187). Indeed, interviews have been described as “the gold standard of qualitative research” (Silverman, 2000, p. 51). With this in mind, and following both the advice of Gillham (2000) and techniques discussed in Gass and Mackey (2000), a sample of the respondents was interviewed following the collection of the survey data. There were three aims in conducting these interviews:

- 1) To find out more about what lay behind students' responses to the questionnaire
- 2) To get more feedback on the reliability and validity of the survey instrument
- 3) To establish the most appropriate interview procedures

Data were collected from interviews with nine students, and all the interviews were recorded. Some of the interviews were held during project meetings, and others were held in my office. The initial plan was to conduct the interviews in English to help me to get a better idea of the students' levels so that any improvements in proficiency during the course of the project would be more obvious. Four of the students were interviewed as a group because of time constraints, and five were interviewed individually. The interview was structured as a verbal version of the questionnaire, so the same questions were asked in the same order. After each question, I also asked the students whether they had found the question easy to understand or not, and whether they would like to expand on any of their answers. Some of the interviews provided much more data than others, and listening to the recordings of these interviews, I noted the following points:

- * Interviews that were conducted during the group meeting sessions were very difficult to hear because of background noise. Wherever possible, interviews should be conducted in a quiet place. In situations where this is not possible, it is useful for the interviewer to repeat or summarize the answers the student has given in a loud voice to aid transcription.
- * Students who were interviewed mainly in English were noticeably more reticent, and the data collected was much less informative. I should not have tried to gather data about their responses to the survey and assess their English level at the same time. It would have been better to have a short chat in English to get some idea of level before starting the main interview in Japanese.
- * My interviewing was sometimes more like an interrogation. It was clear from listening to the recordings that when I asked students to explain why they had answered in a particular way, several seemed to feel as though I was implying that their response had been incorrect or undesirable. This meant that they were much less willing to tell me why they had answered in that way. I would have got much more

useful data by asking the students to talk me through their responses to the questionnaire and then saving any questions I had for the end. I also felt that it would have been useful during the interview to ask one or two of the questions from the survey with slightly different wording to get some idea of the reliability of the original answers.

Insights Gained from Interviews

Because of the relatively small number of students whom I was able to interview, caution must be exercised in generalizing the findings from these interviews to the larger group. However, answers given by students during the interviews did suggest reasons for apparently conflicting responses to the questionnaire. For example, I had wondered why in Section 4 (affective factors) many students had responded that they were not particularly worried about what others were thinking, but then said that they strongly felt it would be easier to speak English if others around them were doing the same. Several of the students interviewed mentioned that this was because worrying about other people was not the only difficulty involved in using English outside the classroom. They said that regardless of whether you were worried about those around you, it is still easier if you are part of a group.

Another apparent contradiction was the one between the high number of respondents saying that they wanted to have their mistakes corrected immediately and the lower than expected number saying that they worried about making mistakes. The opinion of many of the students interviewed was that this is not really a contradiction because although having your mistakes corrected is not essential, it is still useful.

One more theme mentioned in several of the interviews was the distinction between ULI not being a useful way of developing skills (a) because it is not effective, and (b) because it will be too easy to give up and revert to Japanese. In other words, many of the students who expressed reservations about ULI were expressing doubts about their ability to do it rather than the benefits of the activity itself. Future studies will need to isolate these different elements, as questions that ask how students feel about ULI might get very different responses if they include a provision along the lines of “presuming that neither of you starts using Japanese.”

Feedback Regarding the Validity and Reliability of the Survey Instrument

It was clear from the data obtained from the interviews that there had been a number of problems with the questionnaire. These ranged from predictable issues (e.g. the unclear meaning of the middle score on a five-point scale) to the more surprising, such as students mistakenly writing a “b” in an answer box when they intended to write a “d.” This problem could have been avoided by using Japanese letters for the various responses.

Overall, there appear to have been too many different question types on the questionnaire. This led students to misunderstand what was being asked of them. One clear lesson from the interview data was that not all respondents read the instructions for every individual question. If the response format of a question looked even remotely similar to one or more previous questions, many respondents presumed it was to be answered in the

same way.

Another problem was that the layout of some questions led students to jump to conclusions about how they were expected to answer. One example of this was the group of items which asked students' opinions about the value of using English with different kinds of partners. Several respondents automatically assumed that I wanted them to arrange these in a “most-useful to least-useful” ranking. When I asked one student to re-read the instructions for the question, however, she agreed that the meaning was clear. The lesson from this was that the formatting of questions and the order in which they are put need to be considered very carefully at the survey design stage.

Several of the questions suffered from either poor wording or poor conception. In some cases, these difficulties should have been expected, but in others, they were less predictable. The following items were highlighted as being the most problematic.

Item 20 – the value of using English with a non-native speaker from another country. This caused difficulties because it was asking about something outside most of the students' experience, a point made by several of the students during their interviews.

Item 24 – the value of using English with a Japanese person with a high level of English. The problem here was the meaning of high. Some students reported that they interpreted it to mean higher than themselves, whilst others presumed that it referred to Japanese teachers of English. This difference in interpretation may well have led to contamination of the results.

Item 25 – experience of using English outside the classroom. I was surprised to see that a small number of students said that they had tried this, but the interviews suggested that people were including attempts they had made since joining the project. The wording of this item should have made it clear that I was asking about their experience before the beginning of this study.

Item 32 – reasons why Japanese learners of English do not use the language with each other outside the classroom. Many students did not realize that more than one answer was possible, and some again interpreted this as a ranking exercise.

Finally, all items that used a five-point scale from “strongly disagree to agree” caused problems. In cases where it is desirable to have a “no strong opinion” option, it will be necessary to write clearly what the middle score represents. As mentioned in the discussion of results above, it became obvious from the interviews that some students were interpreting the middle score of these types of questions to mean “I have no strong opinion either way,” whilst others were interpreting it to represent mild agreement. This caused particular problems in analyzing the data for questions where “3” was the most common answer.

Summary of Findings and Reflections on the Survey

The findings of this study strongly support the recommendations of Dornyei (2003), Brown (2001) and others that all survey questions be piloted before the main study is conducted. One of the problems of this instrument was its length. The results suggest that it would be more productive for future studies to leave out questions about level or learning experience and focus purely on what students think about the concept of learning by using English with each other outside the classroom in the L1 environment.

Answering the General Research Questions

The research questions for the project of which this survey formed a part related to how students fare in their attempts to use English with their peers outside the classroom, something that was not addressed directly by the questionnaire. The survey was useful, however, in suggesting possible answers to some of the other questions. Although the first part of Study 1 did not provide any insights into the first question (Is using English with peers outside the classroom really beneficial for language learners?) or the last (What other factors play a role in determining whether students who try it will be continue with their efforts or just give up?), possible answers to the other questions are discussed below.

- 1) Will Japanese university students be willing to interact in English outside the classroom?

The response from the students at my university suggested that there is nothing unrealistic about expecting that Japanese students will be prepared at least to make an attempt to use English with each other outside the classroom. In this project, 80 students from a total pool of around 400 volunteered to participate in the project even though there was no direct benefit to them in terms of receiving university credits for their efforts. Furthermore, as these students were non-English majors, it seems reasonable to assume that the response would be even better among those for whom English was their main area of study.

- 2) Why don't motivated students in Japan attempt to use English with each other outside the classroom of their own volition?

The findings of the survey suggested that this has far more to do with a lack of awareness than negative attitudes to the concept itself. It was also clear that these students had not been advised by previous English teachers that ULI was a possible way for them to develop their English skills, a point that confirmed one of the findings of the literature review (see 3.6). The follow-up interviews also suggested that the willingness of students to try using English outside the classroom may be more dependent on social criteria (particularly the attitudes of friends) than factors such as level and experience of learning English.

- 3) What forms of teacher intervention are likely to promote this kind of interaction?

The process of recruiting volunteers for Study 1 and the findings from the survey suggested that encouragement from teachers seems to play an important role in determining

which learners will be prepared to sign up for the idea of using English with their peers outside the classroom. The survey also showed that even among the volunteer participants in this project, there was notably less enthusiasm for the idea of using English with other learners compared to using it with native speakers, teachers, or learners from other countries. The key concerns seemed to be an inability to correct mistakes, the dangers of learning incorrect English, doubts about their ability to stay in English, and worries that their English would not be good enough for use in real situations outside the classroom. These are all areas that could be effectively addressed in regular English classes, suggesting that teachers could play an important role in shaping learner attitudes to ULI.

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