

A Model for Motivating Japanese EFL Learners through Real-life Questioning Strategies

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Employing the concepts of (i) reduced forms, (ii) variations in speech, (iii) modified interaction, and (iv) referential questing strategies, common in Classroom and Natural Spoken Discourse Analysis, this article is an attempt to present a model that may motivate Japanese EFL learners, and help them interact in real-life situations with confidence. The model comprises three phases where the learners develop confidence gradually and maintain interests. In each phase, a learner achieves something worthwhile through his/her own efforts. The model provides the learner a feeling of success and satisfaction and hence sustains motivation. As a pilot study, the model has been partially tested in EFL classrooms of Japanese learners of various proficiency levels from beginners through advanced learners, and showed remarkable results.

Significance of the Questioning Strategies

Most teachers involved in language teaching at Japanese institutions, language schools, and other educational foundations would agree that the Japanese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in general, based on what they achieve in their limited class hours, feel extreme difficulties in interacting with native speakers in real-life situations even at a survival level. This report is a response to this crucial problem as how to minimize their difficulties.

Looking at the nature of EFL learning, one will realize that these learners,

as opposed to the ones with a mixed first language and cultural background taught in an English speaking environment (ESL), have considerably few opportunities to use the language communicatively both outside and within the classroom among peers (Farooq 1993: 88-89). This implies that the teacher is the only source learners expect to communicate with, and as a result s/he is bound to correspond to the learners' expectations in terms of questioning. The need for this teacher-learner interaction is likely to be more demanding in a setting of Japanese learners that can be well understood through a heavily used phrase '*nama no eigo*', which reflects the desire of a Japanese learner to interact with foreigners. Studies relating to ESL teaching have also pointed out the need for teachers' questioning. 'In second language classrooms, where learners often do not have a great number of tools ... your questions provide necessary stepping stones to communication' (Brown 1994:165, also see Nunan (1991: 192). Questioning is reported as one of the commonly used strategies, and in some classrooms teachers use more than half of the class time exchanging questions and answers. Moreover, in studies exploring the contribution of teachers' questions in second language classrooms, these questions play a crucial role in language acquisition. 'They can be used to allow the learners to keep participating in the discourse and even modify it so that the language used becomes more comprehensible and personally relevant' (Richards and Lockhart 1996: 185).

The preceding arguments imply the necessity of employing questioning strategies in an EFL context, with special emphasis on Japanese learners. The literature also expresses interests toward exploring this particular behavior (McDonough and Shaw 1995: 271-272). Furthermore, the information is extremely beneficial for large institutions with a great and increasing number of classes that prefer teachers to become more involved in verbal communication with their students.

Background of the Questioning Strategies

While there are many different types of questions that make it difficult to decide on discrete categories (Richards and Lockhart 1996: 185; Ellis, 1994: 587), prevailing studies have identified two types of questions that are broadly classified as *display* and *referential* (Holland and Shortall 1997: 65;

Chaudron 1993: 127). In the former questions, answers are known to the teacher and are designed to elicit or display particular structures, while the latter are ones to which teachers, in naturalistic and classroom discourse, do not know the answers (Richards and Lockhart 1996).

Other studies have looked at subtypes of display and referential questions in terms of *knowledge, comprehension, application, inference, analysis, synthesis and evaluation* (Brown 1994: 166). Three additional types associated with the concept of negotiation or modification of meaning between interlocutors (Chaudron 1993:130-131) or *modified interaction*, are *comprehension check, clarification request, and confirmation check*.

The concept refers to those instances in an interaction in which the speaker and listener work together to determine that they are talking about the same thing: in other words, when the speaker carries out comprehension checks ('Know what I mean?') to determine whether he/she has been correctly understood, and when the listener requests clarification ('What do you mean, she's silly?') or confirms that he/she has correctly understood ('You stopped because you didn't learn anything?') (Nunan 1989: 45).

Considerable efforts have been made on how teachers modify their speech in the classroom. The modification has been classified into several different ways (Chaudron 1993; Holland and Shortall 1997). These studies looked mainly at *phonological* and *discourse* modifications. The former category includes modification of, for instance, *rate of speech, wait-time* : the length the teacher waits after asking the question before calling on a student to answer it, rephrasing the question, directing the question to another student (Richards and Lockhart 1996: 188; Thornbury 1996; 283; Korst 1997: 280; Chaudron 1993: 128) and *pronunciation*, where in the latter case one of the aspects involves *self-repetition*.

To this end, although extensive literature exists concerning teachers' questioning strategies, modified interaction, rate of speech, and wait-time, it can be argued to be of minor help to students outside a classroom in real-life interactions where the conditions totally differ from the ones in a classroom.

In an EFL classroom of beginners or false -beginners who are in majority a teacher, mainly because of learners' poor language abilities and hesitation to speak out, is obliged to rely more on display than referential questions, slow rate of speech, self-repetition and increased wait-time. Since most classroom interactions lack referential questioning strategies, they obviously decrease the possibilities of any negotiation of meaning between interlocutors. On the other hand, in realistic discourse, speakers interact employing referential questioning, normal speed, negotiation of meaning, and almost no wait-time between a question and its response in the form of *turn-taking*. It is worth to mention here that if students in ESL classrooms in general and EFL classrooms in particular are taught by asking questions, even the referential questions (Farooq 2001-a), with slow speed and longer wait-time (Korst 1997), it is very unlikely for the students to deal with real-life interactions effectively; and hence it's highly probable for them to loose confidence in speaking.

Objective of the Paper

The objective of the article is, therefore, to develop a model to motivate Japanese EFL learners employing certain questioning strategies common in real-life interactions such as the concepts of the (i) reduced forms, (ii) fast speech, (iii) modified interaction, and (iv) referential questions.

The report will first, outline the steps and procedures involved in developing the model along with its classroom implementation; next, discuss how the model can help motivate EFL learners in that they can participate in real-life interactions with confidence; then, report on the findings of a pilot study; and last, comment on the outcomes of the study.

A Model for Motivating EFL Learners

Based on the concepts reported in the 'process model of L2 motivation' (Dornyei, 2003: 17 – 26), and a 'task – evaluation framework' (Farooq, 2003: 83 – 85), this section attempts to develop a model for motivating Japanese EFL Learners through real-life questioning strategies. The model (see Figure 1) comprises three phases (Pre-learning, Learning, and Post-learning), where the Learning phase is further categories in three stages (Underlying Concepts, Classroom Implementation, and Real-life Simulation). At each

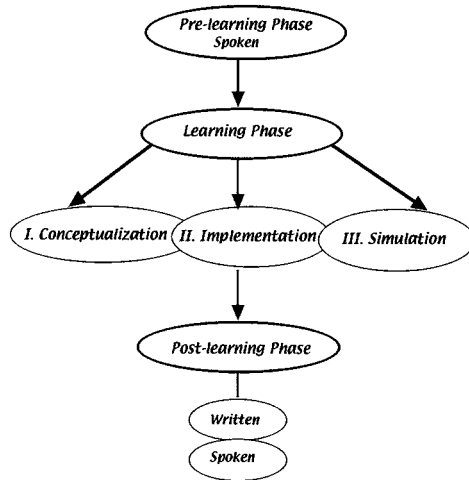


Figure 1: A Diagrammatic Representation of the Model

phase, students learn a skill, relating implicitly or explicitly to the one in real-life interactions, and employ in the subsequent phase.

Pre-learning Phase

As a placement test, in this Pre-learning phase, the students, in small groups of 4-6, interact with the teacher in a situation that closely relates to the one in real life as follows. A small group of Japanese tourists sit and chat in a crowded coffee shop with an empty seat next to them. A foreigner enters the coffee shop, and looking for a vacant seat, asks the tourists to sit next to them. The foreigner, meeting the Japanese tourists for the first time, begins a conversation at a normal speed. The students are informed to (i) chat with the foreigner for about 30 minutes by managing the conversation with their knowledge, experience, and language abilities acquired so far; and (ii) comment on their weaknesses and strengths later.

Learning Phase

Stage I: Conceptualization

In a systematic order, this stage introduces certain theoretical concepts to the students that are required to be understood prior to put them into practice. They are the (i) interaction speed, and (ii) referential questions. Interaction speed specifically refers to the difference between the weak and strong forms (reduced forms), and slow and fast speech. The referential questions implicitly include the modified interaction, a skill associated with the referential questions.

Strong & Weak Forms

Most students and teachers alike are unaware of the concepts of the strong and weak forms (i.e. reduced forms) since they are formally not taught in schools although almost all dictionaries outline them at the beginning pages. Oxford advanced learner's dictionary of current English (1980: xxxix), for example, defines the terms as follows:

Some words in English can be pronounced in two different ways, a 'strong' way, and a 'weak' way. The *strong form* is used when the word is important in the sentence, when for some particular reason the word is spoken with emphasis. The *weak form*, which is the usual form, is used in any other case.

In general, grammar words (Farooq, 2001-a) occupy the reduced forms in interactions. Examples are the adjectives (a, an, his, our, some, the, your); conjunction (and, as, but); preposition (at for, from, of, to); pronoun (he, her, him, them, us); and verb (am, are, can, do, does, had, has, have, is, must, shall, was, were, will, would).

According to Kobayashi and Linde (1984: v) 'Great care must be taken in teaching reduced forms. Inconsistent or inappropriate use of reduced form sound, to the ear of a native speaker, very awkward at best.' On the other hand, for a student who is unaware of the concept, it would be confusing to see that in normal speed communication, the weak form of 'our' resembles the strong form of 'are'; and that of 'his' as 'is'; and even more confusing

when she/he notices that 'a', 'the', 'of' sound the same. This difficulty is well informed by Riggenbach (2002: 157) as 'Learners in a foreign language setting who have had little experience listening to naive speaker speech are often baffled when they hear authentic English spoken in informal contexts'. For this reason, the suggestions are that '[A]ll learners of English must understand such forms as spoken by native speakers' (Kobayashi and Linde, 1984: v).

Slow & Fast Speech

To the writer's knowledge, employing the concepts of weak and strong forms, Griffee (1986, 1992) seems to be the first to bring the terms of 'slow and fast speech' in the language classroom. He defines the speech as *slow*, *fast*, and *faster* where the 'faster' may resemble the normal speed of communication by native speakers. In *slow speech*, a sentence is spoken in such a way that each of its words can be heard with a minor pause (represented by '_') as in the example 'I_do_not_understand'. In *fast speech*, some adjacent words join, because of their weak forms and sound as 'I_don_understand'. Lastly in the *faster speech*, more words cluster and sound as 'Idonunerstan', where the sound of 'd' is also dropped with almost no pause between the adjacent words. In a similar way 'want_to' may sound as 'wana'; 'go_to' as 'gona', 'have_to' as 'hafta' (Riggenbach (2002: 158); and in the extreme case 'would_you_like_them?' as 'julaikem?' .

Modified Interaction

The concept is previously defined at the beginning. The following discussion relates to its support from the prevailing theoretical models relating to Classroom and Spoken Discourse Analysis (Coulthard, 1995).

Modified interaction is essentially a part of native speakers' interaction as is informed by a theoretical model developed by Francis and Hunston (1995:130). They argued that 'loop (L)' in their move (i.e. a part of an exchange) is realized by closed items as 'pardon', 'what', 'eh', 'again', and their variants, said with rising intonation. Furthermore, in the original model by Coulthard (1995: 21) concerning classroom discourse, the 'loop (l)' in the move is realized by a closed class of items – 'pardon', 'you what',

'eh', with rising intonation and a few questions like 'did you say', 'do you mean'.

Referential Questioning

These comprise common questions students have already learnt in their previous classes. Their forms are (1) yes –no questions, (2) 5wh questions (e.g. What?, When?, Where?, Who?, Why?, and How?), and (3) TPR (Total Physical Response) questions which elicit non-verbal responses and demand the responder to make an act (Griffiee, 1987), and their variations. For instance, the request 'Will you please write your name on the chalkboard?' may elicit a physical response (i.e. writing the responder's name on the chalkboard). It is to be noted that the questions are essentially of referential type, in the light of the theoretical analysis proposed by Willis, J (1995: 117 - 118). In her analysis, the display and referential questions can be tested by examining the 'F' part of the I R F eliciting exchanges. If the head of an 'F' had an 'evaluation', the question at I slot is defined as a display question, and if it had an 'acknowledge', it was regarded as referential.

Stage II : Implementation

The stage requires students to have actual practice of the theoretical concepts described in the previous phase essentially in a way that is amusing, active, and surprising to some extent in order to maintain the students' interests as proposed by Dornyei (2003). A number of activities or tasks can be designed, adopted, or adapted (Riggenbach, 2002) which is out of scope of this article. However, traditional methodology of merely explaining the concepts in the form of a lecture should be avoided. As regards the design of motivational tasks in the language classroom, Dornyei (2003: 25) suggests to eliminate boredom and add extra attraction or interest to the task. Below are brief guidelines in some sample activities. One thing common in the activities is that they either involve students in 'noticing' common in Consciousness Raising (CR) activities (Willis and Willis, 1996), or 'inter-acting' with the teacher individually at a normal speed.

Noticing

Weak and strong forms, and slow and fast speech can be well introduced in such activities where a student notices a difference between two items by comparison. For instance, the student is given a list of 5 statements (Riggenbach, 2002: 158-159), or a song's script. The student is first assumed to mark words which he /she thinks would be hard to hear (Item S). The sentences are then spoken by the teacher at a normal speed (Item T). The student comparing it with the Item S marks the number of correct guesses. The process is repeated in that the student rechecks the weak form words and see the extent to which his/her guesses are correct. Slow, fast, and faster speech can be introduced in a similar way. The teacher reads 5 questions and/ sentences or a short conversation (Griffiee, 1992) at a normal speed (Item T), and the students writes the number of words in each statement (Item S). These statements are spoken three times in the order of faster, fast and slow and according to their previously stated definitions. As for the Modified Interaction, the Item S can be a list of 5 widely used prompts such as Pardon me?; Will you please speak (more) slowly?; What do you mean *item*?, Did you say *item*?; along with a conversation with 5 blanks, designed in such a way that blanks can be filled by the 5 prompts. Item T is the answer sheet for the student to notice the difference.

Interaction

In a whole class setting, the teacher asks pre-designed referential questions, used in every day conversations (Kelly and Kelly, 1991), ranging from simple to challenging at a normal speed to which students respond to employing the modified interaction prompts in case the questions are not understood. Obviously, all students are unable to reply at the same time, it will force individual students to give a response through interaction with the teacher.

Stage III : Simulation

Face to Face

In the stage II, students primarily learn how to interact, and how to use the modified interaction prompts. It does not prepare them, however, for face to

face natural communication. Moreover, since the whole class is responding, it may take a considerable time on the part of the teacher. Additionally, it will hardly be of much help to slow or shy students. In extreme cases, it could discourage these students. To overcome this difficulty and to give students a feeling of natural communication, in this phase a real situation must be created where the relationships of the speakers are not as students and teacher, but as strangers. Many real-life situations are possible to create. For instance, a foreigner (the teacher) meets some Japanese tourists (4-6 students group) in a coffee shop, and has a casual talk, just as it takes place outside the classrooms.

Telephoning

Another possibility is to communicate through a handy telephone since most of our students own such phones and they are available in the classroom. However, the telephones are used as an object in that communications are not through the real telephone, but with voice only, and without looking at each other faces. Any situation can be adopted that is possible in real-life such as a home stay student calls his / her host family, teacher, friend, non-Japanese classmate where the native speakers roles are performed essentially by the teacher.

Post-learning Phase

To see whether the training in the previous phases helped the students understand the (i) reduced forms and slow-fast speech, (ii) normal speed English, and whether they are able to (iii) ask questions in a natural way even at a survival level; in this phase they are evaluated through written and oral tests.

Written

The students are assigned to write about 10 – 15 questions for the teacher to ask in small group discussion, by specially indicating the weak form of words in phonetic sounds, practice at home as how to say them in fast or faster speech.

Spoken

In a way similar to the one in the Pre-learning phase, the students are informed to (i) interact with the teacher in small groups of 4-6 students for about 30 minutes, and (ii) comment on their progress later. Using their assignments (that are assumed to be submitted later), they ask the questions to the teacher during this time, and also respond to the teacher's questions which could be directed randomly with a normal speed. Skills that are likely to be observed are the speed of interaction, proper usage of the modified interaction prompts, and the general style of asking questions including promptness, fluency, hesitation, fear, and nervousness.

Students' Motivation

How can the model presented in this article motivate the Japanese EFL learners, and give them confidence to interact in real-life communication with native speakers outside a classroom? Below is a response to the question.

In this model, from the onset a student maintains a feeling of success and satisfaction through his/he progress, and hence sustains motivation, by working on three operations and in the order of 'comparing', 'noticing', and 'integrating'. In this regard, Ellis (1997: 119-123, 162), emphasizing the significance of input (also see Ellis and Hedge 1993: 8), states that the acquisition may be facilitated by teaching explicit 'knowledge' through CR tasks assisted by the operations of noticing and comparing, which are considered necessary for acquisition to take place, and that the input can become 'implicit knowledge' when the operation of 'integrating' is added. Furthermore, Willis, J (2001: 11) states that in order for anyone to learn a language with reasonable efficiency, three essential conditioned must be met. These are 'Exposure' to a rich but comprehensible input of real spoken and written language in use, 'Use' of the language to do things (i.e. exchange meanings) and 'Motivation' to listen and read the language and to speak and write it (i.e. to process and use the exposure). The model can also be seen in the light of a 'process model of L2 motivation' proposed by Dornyei (2003) as how it relates to some of its specific items. His model comprises three stages. These are the 'preactional', 'actional', and 'postactional' stages. In the preactional stage, goals are set and intentions are formed. The actional stage

suggests to generate and carry out subtasks, and in the postactional stage, standards and strategies are elaborated.

In the Pre-evaluation phase, a student is exposed to a rich input of real spoken language in use (i.e. to meet real people as opposed to a teacher), and uses the language to do things (i.e. to respond to real inquiries). The student uses his present knowledge and abilities to comprehend the input. In the Post-learning phase, when he compares his experience with the one in the Pre-learning phase, he realizes his difficulties, weaknesses, and an importance of the learning. He realizes what language, amount, and ways he would be in need to master. In other words, he notices a gap in the form of a negative experience, sets goals, and forms intentions.

In the Learning phase, he begins his learning with clear objectives, a desire for real learning to master and use in real-life communication. In each stage, he notices a gap in the form of a positive experience which gives him confidence to work better in subsequent concepts/tasks (see Figure 1). Willis, J (2001: 14) informs that 'Success and satisfaction are key factors in sustaining motivation. If students feel they have achieved something worthwhile, through their own individual efforts, they are more likely to participate the next time'. The success and satisfaction here can be argued to be associated with the normal speed of interactions and the referential questions. The referential questions promote greater learner productivity (Chaudron 1993: 127) and involve efforts of both teacher and the learners (Thornbury 1996: 279-280); and it has been reported (Brock 1986 cited in Chaudron 1993: 173; Nunan 1991: 194) that learners responded to this type with significantly longer and more complex utterances. The dominance of referential questions relate to modified interaction as predicted by White (1997: 47) in terms of confirmation checks and clarification requests in a two-way information gap (Nunan 1991: 50) among participants which are reported as 'successful classroom second language acquisition' (Nunan 1989: 47). The most interesting feature lying in the effectiveness of the model, however, is the comprehension, and use of the of the TPR questions (specifically suited for instructions) by the students which may solve a major problem in classroom EFL teaching. According to the model developed by Willis, J. (1995), in a language class the directions or instructions given by a teacher

to perform a certain task / activity is claimed to be a natural language, and therefore extremely hard for the students to grasp.

Lastly, in the Post-learning phase, the student integrates his previous achievements. The previous positive experiences during the Learning phase motivate him to work hard and willingly. Here, he again employs the operations of comparing and noticing. In this phase he notices a gap between his first experience (Pre-learning phase) and the final one (Post-learning phase), and finds that his learning is not only successful and satisfactory but also practical in that he can make use of it in real-life communication with confidence.

Pilot Study

As a pilot study, the model has been tested partially with a number of classes varying from beginning to advanced levels, and showed remarkable progress based on the learners' feedback and the writer's observation. Some of the findings are as follows. Overall, students at all phases and stages participated willingly and with interest. At the Pre-learning phase, almost all students were extremely quiet and nervous, and had no idea as what to say at times when things were not understood. In the Post-learning phase, the situation was just opposite in that more than 95% students employed the modified interaction prompts at right times, responded to questions promptly, used follow-up questions, and frequently took initiations. In intermediate - advanced classes (i.e. above false-beginners), the students even took turns.

Concerning difficulties, students in each phase and stage took much longer time especially in big classes of 20-30 students to complete a task / activity. Problems of class management also appeared when the teacher was engaged with one group at a time although the rest of the class was assigned tasks. Most of the tasks required students to practice saying individually the modified interactions prompts, write mini dialogs using the prompts, and then practice them in pairs. Lastly, approximately 15 minutes of regular 90-minute class time per week was assigned for classroom testing, however, practically it took about 30 minutes.

Concluding Remarks

This article presents a model for motivating Japanese EFL learners, and helps them interact in natural communications with confidence. It comprises three phases where the learners work on the operations of comparing, noticing, and integrating common in CR tasks. In the Pre-learning phase, a student with no preparation experiments a learning experience which has the same objective as the one in real-life spoken communications. Here, he notices his weaknesses and difficulties. In the Learning phase, he learns the contents with clear objectives, need and a desire to learn. In the Post-learning phase, he integrates whatever he has learnt so far by experiencing the same task in the way he did in the initial phase. In this phase, he notices his progress by comparing his current experience with the one he had at the very beginning. Hence, in each phase, and at each stage of the Learning phase, the student achieves something worthwhile through his own efforts. The model provides the student a feeling of success and satisfaction and hence sustains motivation as is rightly commented by Willis, J (2001).

Directions for Further Research

Firstly, it is highly recommended to test the entire model in the order of its phases. Secondly, the information at the initial and preferably the last phase should be audio recorded to determine the frequency of modified interaction prompts, speed in a teacher's questions and individual students' responses, promptness of individual responses (i.e. wait-time in questions and responses), and instances of turn-taking. Audio recording is preferred in order to analyze the non-verbal features. Thirdly, it is also desirable to examine the quality of the teacher's questions (e.g. complexity), and students' use of modified interaction prompts. Lastly, the authenticity of interaction in the Pre- and Post-learning phases can be verified through a theoretical model proposed by Francis and Hunston (1995: 123 - 161) for analyzing everyday conversation by transcribing the data and fitting it into the designated categories in the way as is reported by Farooq (1999). If carefully planned, this may lead to a post-graduate research project especially suitable for a master's dissertation. These directions vary from simple to more complex and time-consuming research projects, nevertheless, they

can provide useful information for the EFL/ESL researchers and classroom practitioners.

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