Listeners' Responses in Interaction Through Videoconferencing for Presentation Practices

Atsushi Iino[1], Yukiko Yabuta[2], and Yoichi Nakamura[3]

Abstract. This study investigated the change of listeners' responses of Japanese learners of English over a semester of presentation training sessions. We were also concerned with the relationship between speaking ability and perceived use of listeners' responses. In this paper, the listeners' responses we focused on were: acknowledging signals, repetition of the teacher's utterances, and asking questions to the teacher. Therefore, the research questions were: (1) how did the learners' perceived use of listener's responses change over time?, and (2) what is the relationship between speaking ability and listeners' responses? The participants were 21 Japanese university students whose majors were in Economics. During the semester, the participants experienced five videoconferencing sessions in total. Each English teacher in charge of a group of three Japanese learners listened to three presentations during a 50-minute session. Speaking ability was assessed through an interview test following the format of STEP Eiken test for Japanese learners of English. To obtain the data of the listeners' responses, a questionnaire was provided after each session, asking how much they could actually put into practice from the three types of responses. The results indicated that as for RQ (1), three learners' responses changed to some extent over the sessions. Concerning RQ (2), there was only a significant relationship between speaking ability and repetition of the teacher's utterance. From these results it can be said that videoconferencing interaction, particularly after presentation, provided opportunities for the learners to increase output and interaction, which boosts their L2 performance development.

Keywords: listener's responses, speaking, interaction, videoconferencing, Japanese.

1. Hosei University Tokyo, Japan; iino@hosei.ac.jp
2. Seisen Jogakuin College, Nagano, Japan
3. Seisen Jogakuin College, Nagano, Japan

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1. Introduction

In Japan where English is taught as a foreign language, learners of English at university level have few chances of output and interaction in English as L2. While they have a fair amount of linguistic knowledge crammed for the competitive entrance examination, they have a weakness in applying their knowledge to performance. For example, the learners with a high score in a Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) may not necessarily speak or write well enough in accordance with their listening and reading ability.

As a solution for such learners, we provided opportunities of videoconferencing sessions using Skype in order to further develop their spoken English performance. Concretely, they gave presentations to the English teachers and each one of the presenters had a chance to interact with the teacher about what they had presented after their presentation. That kind of interaction was a crucial opportunity of uncontrolled conversation which indicated the virtual spoken performance of the learners.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Use of videoconferencing for L2 learning

Among previous studies on the use of videoconferencing in L2 instruction, O'Dowd (2000) reported an exchange project between foreign language classes in Spain and the USA. The two groups integrated videoconferencing technology into a task based exchange. As a result, it was demonstrated that the students became more aware of how they viewed their own culture as well as the target cultures through intercultural communication.

Hampel and Stickler (2012) analysed written and spoken interaction in recorded videoconferencing sessions, examining some quantitative data to reveal participation patterns. They also demonstrated a way to use videoconferencing with its multiple modalities for language teaching, showing that new patterns of communication emerged in the process.

2.2. Use of videoconferencing and listeners' responses

A listeners' response, called 'reactive token' by Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki and Tao (1996), is defined as "a short utterance produced by an interlocutor who is playing a listener's role during the other interlocutor's speakership" (Clancy et

al., 1996, p. 355). They classify reactive tokens into five types: backchannels, reactive expressions, collaborative finishes, repetitions, and resumptive openers. Among the categories, De Marco and Leone (2012) investigated backchannels and reactive expressions, which are in their terms, acknowledgement and agreement/ assessment signals. De Marco and Leone (2012) used the spoken data elicited from two videoconferencing conversations by a speaker learning Italian as L2 and a native speaker of Italian. Based on the transcribed data, they found that L2 subjects employed a great variety of acknowledgement and agreement listener responses depending on the situations such as the levels of involvement in the discourse and of acquaintance of the two speakers, and the task type.

Following the results of De Marco and Leone (2012), we tried to find the features of listeners' responses by Japanese university level learners of English and investigated the two following research questions:

- RQ1. How did the learners' use of listener's responses change over time?
- RQ2. What is the relationship between speaking ability and listeners' responses?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants were twenty-one Japanese university students whose majors were in Economics. They were aged between 19 and 21, including 6 females and 15 males, and counted 11 sophomores and 10 seniors. Their proficiency level was, on average, 614 points out of 1000 points in the CASEC[4] test, which is roughly equivalent to 470 points in the TOEFL PBT[5].

3.2. Procedure

During one semester from April to July 2012, the participants experienced five videoconferencing sessions in total. The learners were asked to give a presentation in the videoconferencing session for approximately 10 minutes on the topic they chose. An English teacher was responsible for a group of three Japanese learners. She listened to three presentations during a 50 minute session.

4. Computerised Assessment System for English Communication.

5. Test of English as a Foreign Language Paper-based Test.

During this period, the teacher interacted with the presenter, asking questions and/or giving some comments.

3.3. Data collection procedure

After each session, learners were asked to respond to questionnaires on their preparation and the presentation itself. Most of the interactions were successfully recorded through an application program to record both sides of a videoconferencing interaction.

Speaking ability was assessed through an interview which follows the format of an STEP Eiken test for Japanese learners of English, which consists of reading aloud, picture narration and open-ended free Q&A. The presenter listened to the recorded data and rated each sub-test category with a 5 point scale.

4. Results

The results of the questionnaire between May and July indicated that acknowledgement signals such as "a-ha", "I see", "OK", etc. were perceived to be used constantly by around 80% of the learners ("Yes": May 78% -> June 83%), but did not change much over the sessions. Repetition of the teacher's utterances was not frequently used, though the ratio of its use rose over time (May 33% -> July 39%). Concerning asking questions to the teacher, the percentages of perceived use rose drastically over time (May 61% -> July 89%).

As for the speaking test, the average score was 18.41 out of 25 points (N = 21). The results of the correlational studies were as follows: between speaking test and the perceived listeners' responses, acknowledge signals showed the highest correlational coefficient .846 with 1% significant level. Neither repetition of the teacher's utterances nor asking questions to the teacher showed any significant correlational coefficients (.166 and .187, respectively).

5. Discussion

With reference to RQ (1), the answer was positive. From this result we could say that over time the learners could use listeners' responses more frequently. This could be interpreted in two different manners. Firstly, and in line with O'Dowd's (2000) findings, the presentation training program with videoconferencing generated more interest in intercultural communication for the learners. Secondly, using presentation as a source of videoconferencing may have caused more fruitful

communications, leading to more active interactions with the teacher as listener. In order for the students to give successful presentations, they prepared written scripts and slides. This kind of multimodality in the project, as Hampel and Stickler (2012) hinted, may have stimulated active interactions after the presentations.

Regarding RQ (2), a strong relationship was found between speaking ability and repetition of the teacher's utterances. The reason might be that the more the learners and the teacher know each other, the more learners were likely to be able to control the conversation. These results seemed to follow De Marco and Leone (2012) in that the levels of acquaintance of the two speakers influenced L2 learner's employment of listeners' responses.

6. Conclusion

Overall, we could conclude that videoconferencing interaction particularly after presentation provided opportunities for the learners to increase listeners' responses, in other words, to increase the amount of interactions. This was naturally supposed to boost their L2 development. We believe that this study contributes to the CALL discipline as a case of successful blended instruction of videoconferencing and face-to-face instruction.

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