

Implications of Cultural Constraints on Ordinary Conversation for English Education through Interviews with Native English Speakers

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate abstract images of conversations for native English male speakers. I have been involved in the empirical research to clarify the differences between English conversational style and Japanese conversational style. The research reveals that native English speakers and Japanese speakers have different perspectives on conversations. When elucidated, these perspectives will be helpful for Japanese learners of English to acquire the ability to speak in the communication style which belongs to the Inner-Circle English. This paper compiles the responses from 24 interviewees in the UK, 12 interviewees in the USA, and 17 interviewees in Australia. These interviews were collected by recording experimental conversations upon initially meeting. The result shows that Native English speakers have a core common perspective of conversation that is very different from Japanese people, and the differences therein may hinder effective English speaking ability which does not create negative effects on interpersonal relationships. This paper also attempts to offer learning tips for English learners in Japan.

1 Introduction

Researchers of Conversational Analysis (CA) and Discourse Analysis (DA) usually define a conversation as “a naturally occurred talk,” and regard it as a central activity in social life. Occasionally, they discuss conversation without defining “conversation,” which is because conversation is what we do every day with any number of people. Conversing is too ordinary an activity to wonder what it is. However, conversations are not culturally neutral, although conversation is an organized action and we coordinate our speech while interacting. FitzGerald (2003) claims, “there is also much evidence that different turn-taking styles and the distribution of talk are culture-bound and the source of many problems” (p. 111). She observes that “culturally-influenced features are preference for discrete turns, or for simultaneous talk, length of pauses between turns, length of turn and attitudes to silence and so forth” (p. 111). She warns, “differences in these aspects of communication styles can have negative effects on interpersonal relations” (p. 111). The fact that an advanced English learner in Japan occasionally does not speak successfully in the target language is due to differences of conversation.

The purpose of this study is to determine what is “the conversation” for a native English speaker, and to discuss how we can apply this result to English teaching in Japan. I use the Ethnography of Speaking framework for this analysis.

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2. Previous Studies

CEFR(Common European Framework of Reference) has the advantage of emphasizing pragmatic and socio-cultural competence including politeness, which has been largely dismissed in Japanese English education. On the other hand, the descriptions of CEFR reference levels are not concrete enough for Japan, which has different styles of politeness than Europe. In other words, it is important to employ a style belonging to the target language.

Our previous research reveals that major misunderstandings are caused by pragmatically inappropriate verbal behavior rather than the misuse of vocabulary and grammar (Tsuda, Murata and Shigemitsu, 2003). As Table 1 shows, English and Japanese have different conversational styles. As you can see, conversations in each language have opposing styles.

Table 1: Major differences between Japanese and English conversational styles

Japanese Conversational Style	English Conversational Style
Asking questions is not acceptable verbal behavior. (It is sometimes regarded as impolite.)	Questions are encouraged for eliciting information, for showing interest, and for clarifying or raising doubts.
Long pauses are acceptable.	Pauses are strictly avoided.
Self-disclosure is not preferred.	Mutual self-disclosure is preferred.
<i>Aizuchi</i> back-channelings are usually non-lexical tokens, which <u>signal</u> “listening” and “understanding.”	Back-channelings are usually lexical tokens, which <u>express</u> “sharing concern,” “interest,” “curiosity to know more,” as well as “listening” and “understanding.”
Fixed roles for speakers and listeners.	Equal distribution of talk.
Conversations are based on (subconscious) hierarchical relationships.	Conversations are based on equal status.
Turns are often allocated.	Turns are often taken.
Monologue style is acceptable.	Monologue style is not acceptable. Interactive style is preferred.

(Tsuda, Murata, Otsuka, Iwata, Shigemitsu and Otani, 2011)

Accordingly, “natural conversation” has different meanings according to socio-cultural background. We presume different cultural values for different conversational styles existing between Japanese and English, causing negative effects on interpersonal relationships, as indicated by FitzGerald (2003).

3 Procedures

53 male Native English speakers in the UK, USA, and Australia were interviewed for this research. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviewees were participants who participated in the video recording session for CA research. After each video recording, we conducted a follow-up interview. This paper analyzes the data from the record of the follow-up interview sessions.

The interviewees were recruited through a mailing list at the University of Oxford, Texas University, and Sydney University, with the help of a Japanese language Supplement School in Manchester and Immanuel, and St. Andrew's Church in Streatham, London. Moreover, flyers were distributed and posters were posted at the universities above. All participants met the following criteria:

1. The participants were all males and were aged 22 years or above. We examined only males to eliminate gender variables and because the group of Japanese people who face problems in intercultural communication are generally male businesspersons.
2. No participants had previous contact with each other.

The interviews were conducted following a 30-minute natural conversation session. Participants were asked what they felt during the conversation and discussed this with the interviewers. All the participants and interviewers agreed that their talk would be released. Each interview's duration was approximately 5 minutes; however, this was varied owing to the spontaneity of the interview.

4 Analysis and Findings

The responses were analyzed according to Dell Hyme's SPEAKING model (1974).

4.1 Situations (or Setting and Scene)

The interviewees related their answers to the following situation for the experimental conversation in which they participated:

You are at a casual party at your friend's house. You happen to be sitting next to each other. You are meeting these guests for the first time. During the conversation, your common friend leaves to talk to another guest, so you have to carry on a conversation for the next 30 minutes.

The interviews reveal that this situation—"a party with strangers"—is rather common for all native English speakers across the UK, USA, and Australia. Therefore, they are accustomed to the situation. For them, a first-time meeting often occurs at work situations and usually involves academic talk. Interviewees claimed that they usually get by with "intelligence," although they also feel that a

first-time meeting is awkward. The difference between natural conversations and this experimental conversation is whether participants rotate their seating positions. Seating positions usually rotate at a real party. Two of the participants from Australia said that 30-minute conversations are too short as compared with ordinary conversations.

4.2 Participants

First, all participants across the UK, USA, and Australia did not mind age differences, although their ages were in the range of 22–50 years. They do not feel an age gap. They claimed that there is no hierarchy among mature people. Some conversations were held between two men in their 20s and one in his 50s. Some participants honestly said that it is easier to talk with persons of the same ages.

What matters to them is social and marital status. These categories are influenced by the socio-cultural backgrounds within each country. The participants from the UK said that they have little concern for social status or social position. One participant from the UK said that he found that his social status was higher than that of the others, and therefore consciously attempted not to sound “posh.” The participants from the US seem to be influenced by marital status. Interestingly, unmarried participants said that married participants are more mature and should be respected.

Interviewees mentioned that male-to-male conversation is different from mixed conversation, since the data recording session is a male-to-male first-time conversation. Some of the participants said that they attempted to sound more competent because competence creates hierarchy. Therefore, they attempt to contribute to the conversation to display their competence. For male conversation, jokes are acceptable to create rapport.

4.3 End

End means purposes, goals, and outcomes of the conversation. As shown above, the direction for conversation in which the interviewees participated was a “first-time meeting.” The researchers did not mention how they should organize the conversation explicitly; therefore, they had this conversation according to their socio-cultural background knowledge. For the first-time meeting, they said that they should show their competence and intelligence, and should be more forthcoming in order to build rapport.

4.4 Genre (Topic)

Genre or topic is the kind of speech, act, or event. According to the students among the participants, it is found that favorable topics of conversation for a first-time meeting are research content and activity, study, job, and work. The older participants said that favorable topics are educational background, job, professional topics, and criticism of the current government. It can be said that they enjoy academic and intelligent talk in a first meeting. The interviews also show that topics related to sports are also a safe topic for male conversation. In the experimental conversation, they prefer to talk about sports. Sports seem to be a common topic for male conversation. The results of football matches, and experiences of sports by themselves can be joined by any participant. Topics of hometown, family background, climate, and travel may sound like formal conversation; however, these

topics also help them when other topics are exhausted. For casual conversation, the topic of TV programs, alcohol (especially if the setting is at a bar), and swearing are acceptable.

According to the conversational data, they prefer to talk about various topics; therefore, they often change topics. They enjoyed a topic area unfamiliar to them. They also enjoy knowing the opinions of the other participants. Interviewees say that they like to know the details of a topic in as much details as possible. They prefer to know details and talking about concrete content to abstract or superficial content.

Private matters are taboo topics for a first-time meeting conversation. They defined private matters as information regarding marital status. It was found that talking about family is acceptable; however, talking and asking about a spouse, partner, or girlfriend is not acceptable.

The participant attempts to ask questions to contribute to the conversation when the ongoing topic is unfamiliar to the participant. They are afraid of saying wrong things; therefore, they attempt to be a questioner. Continuing to play the role of a listener is not considered to be good behavior in English conversation.

Interestingly, one participant from the US mentioned the topic of regional background difference. One student from New York said that, generally, people from New York cover world stories and world current news, whereas persons in other places talk about themselves. The US data was recorded at Texas University. The students at UT are from various areas in the United States; however, sometimes the topic centered specific areas.

4.5 Enjoyable conversations

The interviewees generally enjoyed conversation with intelligent people who had their own opinions. They also said that conversations involving various topics are enjoyable. The reason that conversations with intelligent people are fun is that participants can acquire new knowledge. Especially for a first-time meeting, they appreciate to be with people from different backgrounds and from different activity areas. Talking with someone from the same background and same area shares a narrow view of things. However, conversing with people with different backgrounds becomes a source of education.

Talking with different people with different opinions may create conflict in conversation. The native English speaker commonly enjoys those differences in conversation. Being confident is an important value in English-speaking society. They respect people with confidence and competence; therefore, they look forward to conversing with intelligent people.

The depth of content is also important. They disclose information regarding themselves in the conversation even if it is a first-time meeting. For a first-time meeting, the participants require personal information about their conversational counterparts. They are eager to know how the other people think and feel. One of the goals of conversation is to share their feelings. This is how they build rapport in conversation.

Characteristics of participants are not so important; however, talking with bright and optimistic people makes the conversation interesting. Participants should be excited about what they are talking about and what they can learn from the ongoing conversation. Different backgrounds of participants create amusing conversation.

4.6 Difficult conversation

According to the interviews, conversations with pauses and silences are the most difficult conversations. An equal-turn distribution among participants is conventional. They say participants should avoid pauses and silences by asking questions. Seeking common ground is important for a first-time meeting. When one cannot find it, it creates a difficult conversation. We must relate to each other by introducing various topics and searching for a common topic.

5 Norms for English conversation

Norms are the social rules governing the event and the participants' actions and reactions. This section analyzes the implicit social rules that Native English speakers have based their interviews on. According to the interviewees, a good conversation occurs when all participants contribute equally, the topic can be shared by all of the participants, and when responding comments and questions are fully articulated.

Silences and long pauses must be avoided during the conversation because they create tension. In order to avoid them, one should respond to the current speaker or ask questions from the current speaker. In order to do so, one needs to listen to other people in order to provide comments.

Equal distribution is important for conversation. When two of the participants alone tend to take turns with each other in the conversation, one should involve the others in the exchange. When someone is quiet, it is important and polite to involve the other participant in the conversation. Asking a question to the quiet person is an effective strategy for interaction. Beginning with "How do you know ... " is a common practice to continue the conversation. Moreover, according to an interviewee, when only one person talks a lot, the other participants should attempt to distribute the turns for speaking by asking other people to talk and changing the topic. When you feel difficulty taking a turn, you must jump into the conversation. Asking questions is also an important conversational behavior.

Choosing a topic carefully at the beginning of the conversation for a first-time meeting is important. The general topics of a first-meeting conversation tend to be about occupation, birthplace, educational background, major in college, sports, activities on weekends, history of a place, and government review. Exchanging opinions with other participants is important and leads to successful communication. Religion and politics are usually avoided because participants tend to disagree and the topics are not appropriate to enjoy the argument itself; however, these topics are acceptable when they turn out to be a safe topic in the ongoing conversation. Light general topics, such as climate, travel, birthplace, sports, activities during free time, also work well. "What do you do for a living?" and the topic of weather is a typical starting point for conversation. However, conversation only with light topics is not regarded as successful conversation. When the topics change into a discussion of education or personal opinion, the conversation is successful. If one is not familiar with the topic, attempting to ask questions to get more information is preferable. One should learn something from the conversation. Talking about jobs is sometimes a naïve topic because the topic reveals the social position of each participant. Ongoing conversation implies how much one should talk about a given topic. Exchange of opinion is important for successful conversation. The various topics in a conversation tend to work toward common ground. One should be able to talk about a range of topics

in order to prevent other people becoming bored.

One must attempt to be a confident, intelligent, and successful person, and not behave like an ignorant person. Conversation is for building human relationships and trusting one another; being defensive does not contribute to this. One should be reserved, nice, and intelligent. Over emotional and overheated conversation should be avoided. Irrational mannerisms are not acceptable.

6 Conclusion and implications for English education in Japan

This paper illustrates conversation styles of native English male speakers, which finds that the conversational styles between Japanese and English are very different. For successful English conversation, learners of English in Japan need to show intelligence and confidence, and exhibit an attitude to gain new knowledge during the conversation. In order to do so, learners should possess knowledge of various areas and opinions. Socio-cultural backgrounds in English require this norm in natural English conversation. Moreover, in order to build rapport, learners of English must know that they need to share a deeper level of inner mind, even if it is a first-time meeting. Future research will correlate the conversational data and the results of the follow-up interviews.

Appendix: Summary of Interviewees (Due to limitation of space, this is a simplified version)

Country	Recording place and year	Number of participants	Birth year range	Occupation	Educational Background	Ancestral Background
UK	Oxford/2010	10	1977 to 1987	Graduate Students, System Managers, Administrator, Fisher, Gardener, Unemployed	3 PhD 2 MA 4 BA 1 A level	English, British, Anglo-Irish, German English, Irish, Canadian,
UK	Manchester/2011	9	1964 to 1978	Manager, Primary School teachers, Civil servant, Teachers, College lecturer, Engineer, Accountant	7 BA 2 PhD	British, English, Welsh, Irish,
UK	London/2011	5	1961 to 1987	Writer, Actor, PhD student, Gardner, Unemployed	1 PhD 2 BA 1 Academy of Arts	English, British, Welsh, Irish

USA	Austin, Texas/2011	12	1979 to 1985	Graduate Students, Web designer, Lawyer, Sound Engineer, Unemployed, Designer for Theater	1 JD 3 MA 8 BA	European (English, Scottish, British, French, Welsh, German, Irish, Norwegian, Italian, Swedish)
Australia	Sydney	17	1975 to 1987	PhD Students, Engineering, Undergraduate Student, Audio Visual Technician, Administrator assistant, Accountant	13 BA 3 PhD 1 Diploma in Library Info. Studies	French, Irish, German, Scottish, Jewish, French, Sri Lankan, Welsh, Irish Australian, Fijian, Indian

Appendix: Interviewers

The conversational data and interviews were collected for 2010-2012 Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research No. 22520596, Chief Researcher: Sanae Tsuda

Interviewers are:

Sanate Tsuda (Manchester, London)

Yasumi Murata (Sydney)

Yuko Iwata (Austin)

Yuka Shigemitsu (Oxford, Manchester, London, Austin)

Mami Otani (Oxford, Sydney)

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