A study of the relationship between the topics of discussion and students' motivation in cyber conferences

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1. Introduction

In a growing number of classes at universities not only in Japan but also in many countries, teachers are using electronic communication tools, such as videoconference (VC), chatting system, e-mail exchanges, in order to let students experience cross-cultural communication with students in overseas.   Our students also use the VC at the class called "Global Literacy" with the students at Korea University.   In VC, students are expected to participate actively in class; sharing their experience, exchanging opinion, developing critical thinking skills, experiencing transforming learning, and reflecting them on their thinking and knowing to solve the problems while educators are facilitators of learning, rather than givers of information (Cranton, 1994).

However, since it defers a lot from the traditional class styles, students attending in such classes need participating more actively in the conference.   In order to do so, students' motivation shall be a crucial key factor.

There are various definitions of motivation in the areas of Psychology and Education in general, and also in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory and research.   Silva (2002) introduced three typical definitions of motivation.

1. "The combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language."   (Gardner, 1985, 10)

2. "The dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, operationalised and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out."   (Dörnyei, 2001)

3. "The process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained" (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996)

She examined each definition from teachers' and   learners' points of view, and concluded that it is important for teachers in classrooms to consider the ways of teaching, especially goals and processes of the class in order to increase their students' motivation.

This research aims to investigate the circumstances that enhance students' motivation to participate actively in the VC, especially from the viewpoints of its topics and styles.

2. Study

2.1. Research Questions

With the background mentioned above, the present study focuses on the following questions.

1) What kind of topics and the forms of discussion is suitable in order to enhance students' motivation to speak more actively in the classroom?
2) How are the students' motivation related to students' acts in the classroom?

2.2. Subjects

The subjects were 20students at Waseda University (WU) and about 20 students at Korea University (KU) from various majors and grades, taking "Global Literacy" course in the first semester, 2003.   Students in both classes were required to follow the task-based English lessons in the former half in each period, and had VC in the latter half, about 60 minutes once a week.

2.3. Procedure

We collected the data from the classes mentioned above and analysed them with the following procedures:

1) We videotaped their discussion and transcribed them, and then counted the number of students' utterances in each session.
2) We classified their utterances according to the topics and forms of discussion in classes, and then selected the ones that they were able to speak most.   The topics and the forms we treated are as follows:

    Topics: a) Political ("Singaporean securities", Military service")

    　　　　b) Social ("A man who lost his family")

    　　　　c) Casual ("Food", "Colloquial expressions", "Movies and music")

    Forms: a) Discussion based on newspaper articles

    　　　　b) Students' presentation

3) Meanwhile, we sent out the questionnaires to the students (see Appendix A).   Firstly, we asked them to rate their interest to each topic and their recognition whether they could speak at the discussion with 6-point scale, one at least six at most.   Then, we asked them to choose one topic to each question below:

    a. Which topic were you interested/ not interested in most?

    b. On which topic were you able to/ not able to speak at most during the discussion?

4) We checked the correlation between students' interest and the number of their utterances as a support of foregoing survey.

3. Results

3.1. The total number of utterances

In the first place, Figure 1 shows the total number of students' utterances in each

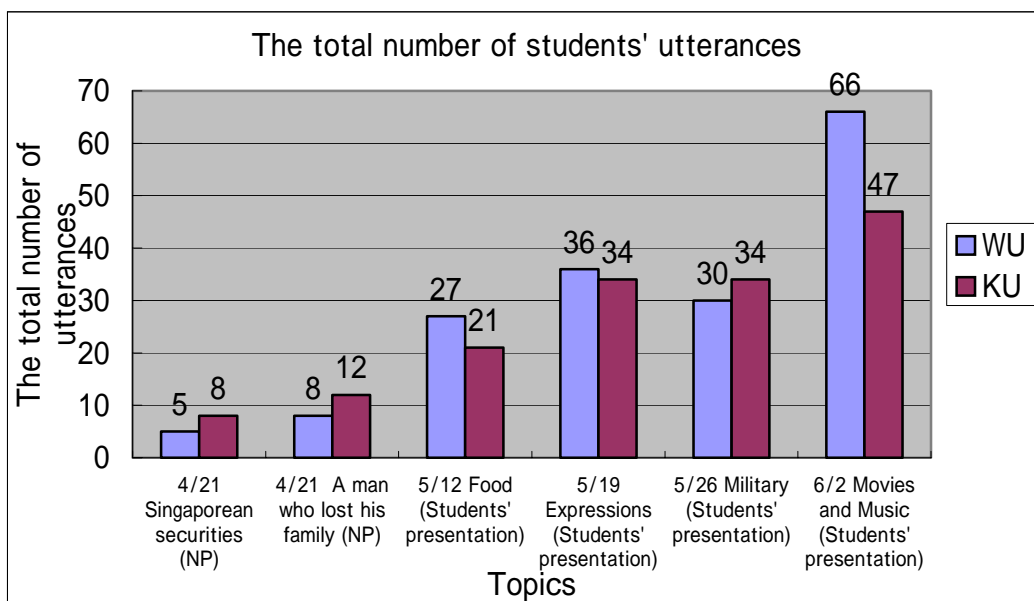university at each session.

Figure 1.   T he total number of students' utterances

Judging from this result, we can say that students at both universities spoke at most under the topic of "Movies and music", which is categorised as casual topic, students' presentation style.

3.2. Questionnaire to the students

Next, we compiled the data of questionnaire to the students, and here are the results of each question as Figure 2-1 and 2-2 show below.

<interested>   <not interested>
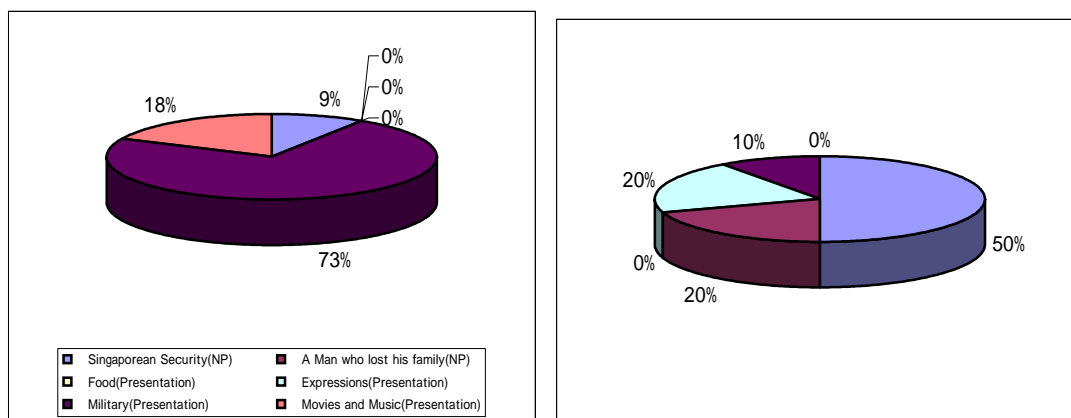
Figure 2-1.   The result of questionnaire
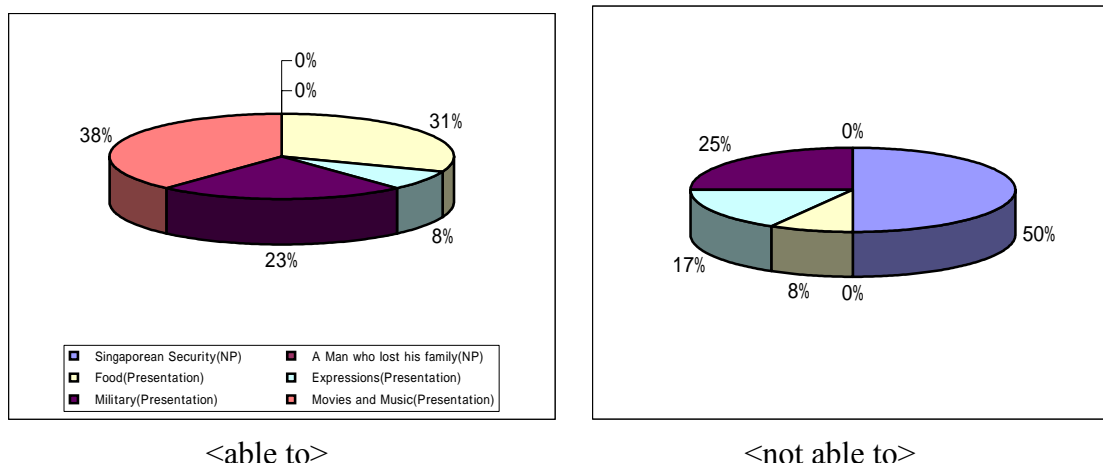a) Which topic were you interested/ not interested in most?

<able to>   <not able to>

Figure 2-2.   The result of questionnaire

b) On which topic were you able to/ not able to speak at most during the discussion?

3.3. Correlation between students' awareness and the number of their utterances

Table 1 shows the results of the statistic analysis of the correlation between students' interests in each topic and the number of their utterances.

Topic	r-value	p	df
Singaporean securities(4/21)	.061	.816	17
A man who lost his family(4/21)	.170	.515	17
Food (5/12)	.196	.452	17
Colloquial expressions (5/19)	.068	.79	17
Military service (5/26)	-.125	.645	17
Movies and music (6/2)	.306	.232	17

$**=p<.01, \ *=p<.05$

Table 1.   Correlation between the total number of utterances of students and their interests in each topic

As Table 1 shows, there were almost no significantly differences between the total number of utterances of students and their interests in each topic.   The reason of this result shall be analysed in the following sections.

4. Data analysis and discussion
4.1. The suitable topics and the forms of discussion for enhancing students' motivation

As Figure 1 shows, students at both sides (KU and WU) spoke at most under the topic of "Movies and music", while, examining the result of the questionnaire to the students, most of them got interested in this topic and they also felt that they could speak at most under this topic.   It is classified into the category of "casual topic",

"presentation style".   Why could they speak at most under this topic?   That would be because, as students actually answered in the questionnaire (see Appendix B), the topic is quite familiar to the students.   As Ellis (2003) explained, using "the theme generator" in Estaire and Zanón (1994), topics relating to students themselves and their daily lives are obviously close, and the closer the topic is to the students, the more they are able to speak.   Of course, the topics chosen for a particular group of learners will depend on both the students' level of proficiency, i.e. close topics being more suitable for beginner learners and remote topic for more advanced learners.   Therefore, when teachers plan and make the syllabus of their courses, even for the courses via VC, they should grasp the level of proficiency of their students, consider the familiarity of the topics to their students, and then choose the proper topics that are suitable for their students in order to let them speak out more during the discussion.

However, this result also attracts teachers' interests with the following aspect. As Figure 2-1 shows, students got interested at most in the topic of "Military service", although it is categorised into the political one.   Concerning this result, students seemed to be interested in the situation of partners' country, in this case, Korea, for example, the differences between their countries, their current political issues, and their historical issues.   This aspect also gives teachers some suggestions for making syllabus especially for the classes via VC.

So far, we examined the reason why students could speak at most under the certain topics.   Next, we would like to consider the effect of the style of discussion towards the number of students' utterances.   The session students spoke at most (2nd June, under the topic of "Movies and music") was done by students' presentation style. With this style, students can accumulate lots of knowledge on the process of the preparation before discussion for their presentation in the class.   That helps students speak more than at the session with other styles, for example, just reading the materials.

4.2. The relation between the number of students' utterances and their interests

As table 1 shows, we cannot say that there is a correlation between students' interests in the topics and their number of utterances at the discussion.   It means that students cannot speak out so often during the discussion even though they are interested in the topic.   It is natural to consider that there would be some psychological factors; for example, stress they feel during the session because it was the first for time for them to attend VC, or because they were unaccustomed to it.   Actually, our students answered so in the questionnaire (see also Appendix B).   However, if this psychological factor was the only reason of the paucity of their utterance, students' motivation should be reflected to their number of utterances session by session. Nevertheless, as the session goes by, there was still no correlation between them There might be some other reason, for example, their fluency to speak English itself. It must be kept researching.

5. Conclusion and pedagogical implications

Through this research, we could pick out the topic and style that may suitable for enhancing students' motivation, i.e. casual topic with students' presentation style. Nevertheless, there are still some disincentives to reflect their motivation to their action (i.e. speaking out) during the discussion as we examined above. Therefore, it is quite important for teachers to consider how to improve students' autonomy, when they design the classes.

As Silva (2002) indicates, students' autonomy consists of three processes; before action, action, and post action, and the first one is the most important stage to improve their autonomy. For the students, it means to evaluate their level on tasks (i.e. presentation and discussion) by themselves, to set the goals of the discussion, and to prepare before the session in order to achieve their goals. While, for the teachers, it is important to design the syllabus that enhances students to achieve their goals, and to support them during the session.

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Appendix A
Questionnaire to Students

前期に授業の中で行った韓国とのビデオ会議について、お手数ですが以下のアンケートにご協力ください。なお、実験の都合上記名してもらうことになりますが、このアンケートへの回答が皆さんの成績に影響したり、目的（実験）以外の用途に使われるようなことは決してありませんので、安心して、皆さんの素直な意見を記入してください。

（　　）年　名前（　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　）
１．前期、ビデオ会議では以下の各トピックを扱いました。各トピックについて、それぞれ①興味の有無（予習・授業を通じてどの位興味がもてたか）、②セッション中にどのくらい発言できたと思うか、を以下の尺度で自己評価してください。

1 ←←←←←← 2 ←←←←←← 3 ←←←→→→ 4 →→→→→→ 5 →→→→→→ 6

①全くなし　　　　あまりなし　　どちらかと言うとなし　どちらかというとあり　ややあり　大変あり

②一度もできず　　あまりできず　どちらかと言うとできず　どちらかというとできた　ややできた　かなりできた

1. About Singaporean Securities (from Newspaper)　（①　　　　）（②　　　　）
2. About a man who lost his family (from NP)　　（①　　　　）（②　　　　）
3. About a woman who became a princess (from NP)　（①　　　　）（②　　　　）
4. About gaming centres (from NP)　　　　　　　（①　　　　）（②　　　　）
5. Food (Students' presentation)　　　　　　　　（①　　　　）（②　　　　）
6. Expressions (Students' presentation)　　　　　（①　　　　）（②　　　　）
7. Movies and Music (Students' presentation)　　（①　　　　）（②　　　　）
8. Military (Students' presentation)　　　　　　（①　　　　）（②　　　　）
9. Drama(After -Movie Discussion)　　　　　　　（①　　　　）（②　　　　）

２．上のトピックの中で①最も興味がもてたもの、②もてなかったものは其々何ですか？またその理由は何だと自分で思いますか？トピックは上の番号で記入してください。

３．上のトピックの中で①セッション中最も自分が話せたもの、②話せなかったものは其々何ですか？またその理由は何だと自分で思いますか？トピックは上の番号で記入してください。

４．前期の経験を踏まえて、①自分が最も興味を持てるトピック、②韓国とのビデオ会議に向いていると思うトピックはどのようなものですか？それぞれ理由もつけて答えてください（前期に扱わなかったトピックでも OK です。また、①と②は同じものでも違うものでも構いません）。

５．前期の経験を踏まえて、後期こういう形態でビデオ会議をやってみたいというものがあれば記入してください。

ご協力どうもありがとうございました。

Appendix B: Free comments from students

Q1.　On which topic were you interested / not interested in most?

<Reason>

　(Interested in "Military services")

　　　＊There are so many differences between Korea and Japan on this topic, but they
　　　　didn't know about it well.

　　　＊They are interested in Peace.

　(Interested in "Movies and music")

　　　＊They love movies and music.

　　　＊This topic was very familiar to them.

　　　＊They were able to talk a lot on the topics related this topic.

　（Not interested in "Singaporean securities"）

　　　＊They didn't know what to do because that was the first time for them to
　　　　attend the conference.

　　　＊They thought it's far from their own life.

　（Not interested in "A man who lost his family"）

　　　＊They didn't get interested in the contents of Newspapers.

Q2. On which topic were you able to / not able to speak most at the conference?

<Reason>

　（able to speak on "Movies and music"））

　　　＊They got interest most.

　　　＊The topic was very familiar to them.

　　　＊They got a lot of knowledge through their presentation.

　(not able to speak on "Singaporean securities")

　　　＊They couldn't think of what to say.

　　　＊They didn't know what to do because that was the first　time for them to
　　　　attend the conference.

　　　＊They thought it's far from their own life.

　(not able to speak on "A man who lost his family")

　　　＊They didn't get interested in the contents of Newspapers.