Whys and How's of Language Exchange Meetings

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore the primary factors influencing language exchange activities and the correlates of a satisfactory meeting. By surveying 64 English learners who posted a profile on language exchange websites, the researchers have discovered that language exchange partners switch languages randomly, rarely follow a lesson plan and hardly ever correct pronunciation and grammar mistakes. Additionally, the results suggest a close relationship between topics discussed with language exchange partners and satisfaction with the partners.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays it is easier to reach out, connect and develop relationships with people anywhere in the world. Despite the fact that there are a number of books about computer-mediated cross-cultural communication and several articles about inter-cultural language study encounters on the internet, there is limited research available about face to face language exchange meetings. This study aims to close this literature gap by exploring the "whys" and "how's" of Japanese-foreigner language exchange meetings. By surveying English learners who participated in meetings with language exchange partners for more than 3 times, we are able to better understand the underlying reasons behind face to face language exchange meetings and more importantly the previously unknown conversation patterns in these meetings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of language exchange ("Tandem language learning")

Language exchange, which is also called "tandem language learning," can be defined as language-based communication between two learners who speak different native languages and who intend to learn each other's native language as an L2 (Cziko, 2004). Tandem language learning can also be defined as a form of language learning whereby two people with different native languages work together in pairs in order to: (1) "learn more about each other's character and culture"; (2) "help each other improve their language skills" (Calvert, 1999, p. 56); and (3) exchange knowledge (Calvert, 1999).

Tandem learning has a long history, and its educational value has been researched and proven. It dates back to the early 1800's, when several mutual learning programs were set up for school-aged children in England (Calvert, 1992). In trilingual countries such as Belgium and Switzerland, tandem language learning is easily achieved, whereas it is not so convenient to

establish in monolingual countries, such as Japan and Korea (Dunkley, 2006). In 1968, French and German youth exchanges adopted the method and developed learning materials. This movement encouraged a project for Turkish immigrants in Germany to participate in a language exchange with German learners of Turkish. Then in 1979, Jürgen Wolff developed procedures for organizing German-Spanish tandem groups in Madrid. In 1983, this Spanish-German Tandem Partnership transformed into TANDEM Networks in 16 different European countries (Calvert, 1992; Cziko, 2004). Helmut Brammerts, who formed the International Email Tandem Network in 1994, is another pioneer of tandem learning (Cziko, 2004). Recently, Cziko established the Electronic Network for Language and Culture Exchange (ENLACE), which aims to help language learners find and communicate with language partners online (Cziko, 2004). All of the most recent networks provide tandem language services on the web, serving as a model for new commercial and non-profit language exchange websites (Cziko, 2004). A Google[1] search for the phrase "language exchange" returns more than 4 million hits, and there are more than two dozen online language exchange services that are open to the public.

Language learning benefits

During conversational interaction, a language learner receives feedback from his/her language partner (either the language teacher or a foreign language learner at a higher level of competence). Upon receiving the feedback, the learner often corrects the earlier linguistic form, conversational structure, message content, or all of them, until a sufficient level of understanding is reached. According to the Interaction Hypothesis, this is called "negotiation of meaning" (Long, 1996, p. 418).

> ".... negotiation of meaning, and especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the native speaker or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (Long, 1996, pp. 451-452).

Kessler (1992) says, "Peer feedback in language learning can be more powerful than teacher feedback" (pp. 68-69). Peer feedback is defined as "information the learner receives from a peer in response to his or her communicative efforts" (Mackey & Abbuhl, 2005, p. 210). Previous studies on peer interaction have assumed that a learner benefits from peer interaction only if the peer is at a higher level of cognitive development (Skon, Johnson & Johnson, 1981).

Roberts (1995) conducted a study that shows that university level American learners of Japanese were aware of the teacher's feedback only a fraction of the time and they usually did not understand the nature of the error. The student's perception ratio of teacher's feedback ranged from 24% to 37%, whereas the student's perception ratio of understanding the nature of the error ranged from 16% to 25% (Roberts, 1995). Although this study was conducted with only a small number of subjects, this shows that teachers should ensure that their learners be aware of the feedback and understand their errors.

O'Dowd (2007) found that teachers play an important role in cross-cultural language exchanges. O'Dowd adds that tele-collaborations like email exchanges require that both teachers and students be explicitly prepared for the activity. Bower and Kawaguchi (2011) show that corrective feedback on non-native speaker's errors did not take place, but the negotiation of meaning often occurred to overcome communication problems during chat exchange between the Japanese university students and the Australian counterparts.

Cultural learning benefits

"Culture" can be defined as "socially transmitted patterns of behavior and interaction" (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998, p. 98). A conversation between a native speaker of English (NSE) and an EFL learner often not only helps the language learner to improve his/her linguistic proficiency, but also enhances intercultural awareness (Kramsch, 1998). It is generally recognized that a conversation between NSE and an EFL learner often leads to misunderstandings due to either the misuse of language or the failure to notice the cultural nuances contained in the language (Dekhinet, 2008). Also, NSEs consider at least eight sociolinguistic factors when speaking in everyday conversation: (1) who the speaker wishes to identify with; (2) who the speaker is talking to; (3) what kind of impression the speaker wishes to make on his or her listener (Arndt & Janney, 1981; McMahon, 2002); (4) the degree of formality that the speaker uses in speech; (5) the volume of noise which surrounds the speaker; (6) the rate of speech; (7) the speaker's perception of the listener; and (8) the frequency of the words (Roach, Hartman, & Setter, 2003). NSEs learn these sociolinguistic factors from their childhood to adolescence in daily social encounters, whereas EFL learners do not. Therefore, EFL learners often encounter misunderstandings when having conversations with NSEs.

The level of linguistic proficiency is not proportional to intercultural awareness. In other words, even highly fluent EFL learners still often have intercultural misunderstandings (Morgan 1998). This implies that there might be a relationship between learning a foreign language intercultural understanding (Jin et al., 1998). Jin et al. (1998) state that "language reflects culture," (p. 100). When a language learner speaks a foreign language, the way he or she speaks reflects both his or her native culture and also the foreign culture. This process is seen as "culture of communication," as illustrated in Figure 1 below.
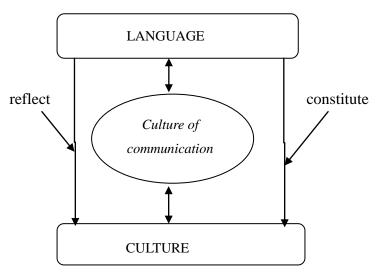

Figure 1. A simplified framework of communication and learning (cf. Jin et al., 1998)

Since the literature review revealed the fact that conversations with native speakers not only improve the grammar and pronunciation but also increase intercultural awareness (cf. Jin et al., 1998; Morgan, 1998), we ask the following research questions to find out the priority of Japanese language exchange partners:

R1: Do Japanese language exchange partners put more emphasis on cross-cultural experience or learning English?

We also pose the following research questions to address the issues that were not covered in the past literature

R2: What are the major reasons for Japanese language exchange partners to seek a foreign language exchange partner?
R3: What is the typical course of the language exchange meetings between Japanese and foreign language exchange partners?
R4: When Japanese and foreigners meet for a language exchange, what topics do they talk about?
R5: Is there a relationship between the conversation content (in language exchange meetings) and satisfaction with language exchange partner?

METHODOLOGY

As a first step, we identified popular language exchange web sites through search engines and checked the web traffic of each site on Alexa.com. We only selected the top two web sites (mylanguageexchange.com and conversationexchange.com) to solicit the members as we suspected the websites with low traffic might have high turnover which would negatively impact our response rate. We sent out invitations with a link to our online survey to 500 members on mylanguageexchange.com and 100 members on conversationexchnage.com (via convenience sampling: the most recent members who logged in last 30 days). Additionally we posted information about our study on the language exchange group of Mixi (one of the largest Japanese social network websites according to Alexa.com). There was no incentive to participate in the survey and the response rate was about 10%.

The data was collected in November, 2009 via a password protected online survey web site. The questionnaire was in Japanese and all of the participants listed Japanese as their mother tongue and English as the language they study. The age of the participants ranged between 18 and 65, and the majority were females (85%). It was also observed that most Japanese who create online profiles to find English speaking language exchange partners on the internet were females (approximately 76%). After counting the number of males and females among the last 100 people who created profiles on mylanguageexchange.com we found that only a small minority, 24 out of 100, of people who listed Japanese as mother tongue were males. This means that higher response rate of women in our data was natural. There were a total of 64 participants residing in 7 different countries (Japan, 39; United States, 12; Canada, 6; United Kingdom, 3; Australia, 3; New Zealand, 1). Out of the 64 participants, 35 have mentioned having had a chance to meet with a person face to face for a language exchange and 25 of them reported meeting regularly with their language exchange partners. Basic frequency analyses were conducted using SPSS 15 to interpret the data.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The answers to our first and the second questions clearly indicated that increasing cross-cultural awareness and learning about different cultures are more important than simply learning English (see Tables 1 & 2).

Table 1
Q1. Which one of the following is more important for you when you are doing a language exchange?

Learning English	28%
Gaining communication experience with foreigners	72%

Note: N=64

Table 2
Q2. Why did you search for a language exchange partner? (Multiple selection)

Wanted to interact with native English speakers	70%
Wanted to interact with anybody who has a different culture	70%
Needed help for work/own business	55%
Currently living overseas and want to study English	33%
Wanted to talk to a person from different culture about own interest area	33%
Returned from a foreign country and wanted to maintain language ability	30%
Currently living overseas and looking for a friend	17%
Interested in partnering with a foreigner in the future	14%
Planning to go overseas to study	14%
Needed help for school	8%
Currently partnering with a foreigner	8%
Currently living overseas and have been looking for local information	8%
Other reason	8%
Planning to immigrate to or live in a foreign country	8%
Foreign friend left the country and wanted to keep practicing English	6%
Worked at a foreign affiliated company	2%

Note: N=64

Another interesting finding that emerged from the data was the importance of language exchange for job/work related purposes. Interestingly more than half (55%) of the respondents mentioned that they are interested in language exchange because they needed language help for work or their own businesses. Studying English overseas (33%), wanting to talk to foreigners about hobbies and interests (33%) and concern about maintaining language skills after returning from overseas were the other manifest reasons why people looked for a language exchange partner.

Despite the low sample size, it was obvious that most language exchange encounters did not follow a structured plan (See Table 3). Speaking half the time in Japanese and half the time in English which might be considered as a fair and convenient way of language exchange was quite rare (12%).

Table 3
Q3. Which one of the following best defines your language exchange style?

Mostly speaking in English	32%
Switching between Japanese and English randomly	28%
Speaking half the time in English and half the time in Japanese	12%
Switching between Japanese and English topic by topic or time by time	12%
Talking simple topics in Japanese and complicated topics in English	8%
You both bring questions about the language you are studying	4%
Your partner talks in English and you respond in Japanese	4%
Other style	0%

Note: N=25

In order to answer research question #4, we provided the respondents with some common topics and asked to indicate how often they talk about each topic on a 5-point scale (1: never, 2: rarely, 3: sometimes, 4: often, 5: always). As expected, hobbies (M=3.91, SD=.73) and life & culture related issues (M=3.87, SD=.81) were the most common conversation topics during language exchange encounters. On the other hand, language exchange partners rarely talked about slang (M=2.26, SD=1.42).

Table 4
Q4. How often do you talk about these topics when you meet with your language exchange partner? (1=Never, 5=Always)

Topics	Mean	Std. Dev.
Hobbies and interests	3.91	0.73
Life, culture, history or travel in your partner's country	3.87	0.81
Life culture, history or travel in Japan	3.78	0.90
Your/your partner's relationship with others (friends, family, etc.)	3.57	0.84
Cultural differences and cultural communication problems	3.52	0.85
Your problems	3.35	1.40
Your/your partner's background	3.30	1.15
Problems of your partner	3.26	1.42
Your/your partner's future goals	3.13	1.32
Testing each other's vocabulary (or Kanji)	3.13	0.92
Your/your partner's personality	3.04	1.07
Current events or news	3.00	1.17
Men and women relationships	2.96	1.22
Slang in each other's language	2.26	1.42

Note: N=25

Additionally subjects were also asked about their language exchange activities during language exchange encounters (Table 5). Surprisingly, subjects rarely corrected grammar (M=1.35, SD=.65) and pronunciation mistakes (M=1.70, SD=1.11) of their partners and hardly ever followed a lesson plan (M=1.83, SD=1.03). The average score for bringing a friend or partner to meetings was around 3 on a 5-point scale implying that people do not

hesitate to bring a third party to language exchange meetings.

Table 5
Q5. How often do you do the following during language exchange activities? (1=Never, 5=Always)

Activity	Mean	Std. Dev.
Bringing questions about English vocabulary or grammar	3.22	1.17
Bringing a friend or partner to your meeting	2.96	1.22
Bringing a notebook and taking down notes	2.96	1.36
Bringing your writing sample or diary to check for mistakes	2.04	1.26
Following a textbook or lesson plan	1.83	1.03
Correcting pronunciation mistakes of your partner	1.70	1.11
Correcting grammar mistakes of your partner	1.35	0.65

Note: N=25

Finally, we ran a correlation analysis to see if there is any relationship between the content of language exchange conversations and satisfaction with current language exchange partner. It appeared that talking about personal problems (r=.53, p<.05) and language exchange partner's problems (r=.44, p<.05) are positively related with partner satisfaction. Additionally, as rare as it seems, correcting grammar mistakes of the partner also is positively correlated with partner satisfaction (r=47, p<.05).

Table 6
Correlation between Current Partner Satisfaction and Conversation Content

	Satisfaction (r)	Significance
Problems of your partner	0.53	0.01
Correction of grammar mistakes	0.47	0.02
Your problems	0.44	0.03
Men and women relationships	0.37	0.07
Hobbies and interests	0.28	0.18
Your/your partner's relationship with others	0.25	0.22
Slang in each other's language	0.25	0.23
Your/your partner's future goals	0.14	0.53
Life, culture, history or travel in your partner's country	0.11	0.61
Your/your partner's personality	0.10	0.65
Your/your partner's background	0.08	0.70
Life culture, history or travel in Japan	0.00	0.99
Cultural differences and communication problems	-0.04	0.85
Current events or news	-0.15	0.47

Note: N=25

CONCLUSIONS

In this exploratory study, we shed a light on the common patterns in real life and face to face language exchange encounters between Japanese and English speakers. Two of the significant findings to emerge from this study are the cross-cultural experience aspect of language exchange and unstructured format of these meetings. The results revealed that language exchange partners switch languages randomly, rarely follow a lesson plan and hardly ever correct pronunciation and grammar mistakes.

Although tandem language learning and language exchange services emerged as a response to the need for language practice, majority of the respondents indicated that increasing inter-cultural awareness and having an experience of cross-cultural communication with foreigners are as important as, if not more so, than studying English. This finding, on the other hand, might be only observed in Japan which is relatively a homogenous country with limited exposure to foreign cultures. Regardless, academicians should keep in mind that participants tend to see language exchange as a cultural enhancement opportunity rather than a language study tool. By the same token, expectations from language exchange meetings in terms of grammar and pronunciation improvement might fail to be met because of random nature of these meetings and disinterest in corrections among involved parties.

Lastly, the evidence from this study suggests that there is a close relationship between language exchange topics and satisfaction with language exchange partner. When both parties talk about personal problems and correct each other's mistakes, satisfaction with the meeting increases. In other words, the more partners talk about personal problems the higher their satisfaction gets. However, meeting satisfaction might be the cause of self-disclosure, not the result of it, as correlation does not always mean causation.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although we attempted to analyze face to face language exchange practices of EFL learners by examining different aspects of language exchange meetings, there still is a need for more comprehensive studies that investigate the relationship between language exchange, language proficiency and cross-cultural competence. Specifically, testing Gudykunst's (1985) cross-cultural anxiety/uncertainty management theory in language exchange meetings will be of enormous help to academicians who research cross-cultural communication.

Readers should note that, the sample in this study was very small and restricted to Japanese EFL learners who listed their profiles only on the two major language exchange portals. It would be desirable to replicate these findings with a larger sample size by including subjects of different nationalities and using different web sources. Additionally, there were serious limitations with our data collection method since we did not have any incentive for the participants and used a non-random approach. Since it is likely that people who agreed to participate in the study might have certain characteristics (e.g., heavy internet users or extroverts), our results may not necessarily reflect the general behavior of average language exchange partners. Furthermore, the findings might be biased because of the unequal distribution the EFL learners who live in Japan (home country) and outside Japan (host country) as the needs and expectations from language exchange meetings are likely to be different depending on the spoken language of the country of residence.

Note
1: Google search conducted on April 18, 2011.

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