

Creating Flow in English Conversation Classrooms: A follow-up study on Variable Sentence Response and Conversation Cards

Nathaniel FRENCH

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Variable Sentence Response (VSR) 及び Conversation Cards を用いた2つの学習法は学習者の英会話能力を高める大学レベルの英語クラスにおける新たなアクティビティである。著者の先行研究 (French, 2012) において、リッカート尺度を使った調査によると、これらを用いたクラスは学生が受けていた他の英語授業に比べ、授業評価及び学ぶ動機に対して、より高い点数が得られ、且つ、英語力の改善を感じているとする意見も多く見られた。この先行研究を基に、VSRに異なる話題を用いたり、異なるクラスを対象に実験を行ったが、ここでも、同様の結果を得ることが出来た。また、学習者が感じる時間の経過についても、これらのアクティビティを使った授業ではより授業時間が短く感じられる等の肯定的な意見を得ることが出来た。最後にVSRの効果は、クラスにより大きく異なることが分かり、この点において、様々な教育現場においても広く応用出来ると考えられる。

I. Introduction

In previous research, classrooms which included Variable Sentence Response (VSR) and Conversation Cards (previously described as the English Conversation Wheel) received higher motivation and perceived improvement scores than the students' other classes (French, 2012). In an effort to continue the improvement of Communicative Language Teaching in Japan, this paper seeks to further the previous research done on these two communicative activities.

II. Flow

Flow is a theorized mental state of operation which has its origins in the field of psychology (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Since then, it has been brought into the field of language learning by notable language learning researchers (Grabe & Stoller, 1997), and has been shown to be useful in foreign language classrooms (Egbert, 2004). Flow is characterized by deep concentration in an object of study or work as a result of one's skills being challenged in an optimal environment. This deep concentration, sometimes known as being "in the zone", can lead to higher quality time on task and increased intrinsic motivation (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). Understanding flow in the language learning classroom can therefore help to maximize learner productivity inside the classroom, and then motivate students to continue studying outside the classroom as well.

Csikszentmihalyi describes situations of flow as ones which consistently contain the following eight points (1990, p. 49):

1. Tasks must have a reasonable chance of being completed.
2. Concentration on the task must be possible.

3. The task has clear goals.
4. The task provides immediate feedback.
5. Involvement in the task precludes worries and frustration from ordinary life.
6. The person is able to exercise a sense of control over his/her actions.
7. A concern for self disappears.
8. A sense of duration of time is altered.

III. Research

The first two purposes of this study were to see if the results found in a previous VSR study (French, 2012) were repeatable with slightly different classroom conditions. The 2012 study found that VSR and Conversation Cards based classes received higher scores than the students' other English classes in terms of likeability, motivation, and perceived improvement. As such, this study seeks to build upon these results by testing how university students in Japan reacted to VSR and Conversation Cards with (1) a different theme for VSR, and (2) with different levels of students.

In addition, the third purpose of this study was to determine if students engaging in VSR and Conversation Cards lost track of time while studying. This was done in order to measure if students were experiencing flow in VSR or Conversation Cards based classes, and if this level was higher than in the students' other English classes.

The fourth and final purpose of this study was to determine which parts of VSR were responsible for the high motivation and perceived improvement scores found in the previous study.

1. Test subjects

The students were from two different universities in Japan. The first university was an all-girls school, the students were English communication majors, and there were a total of 72 students in four classes. Before the semester started, most of the students took the TOEIC test. Out of the 62 students that took the TOEIC test, the students had an average score of 437 with a standard deviation of 99. The majority of the scores were between 301 and 550 (Figure 1).

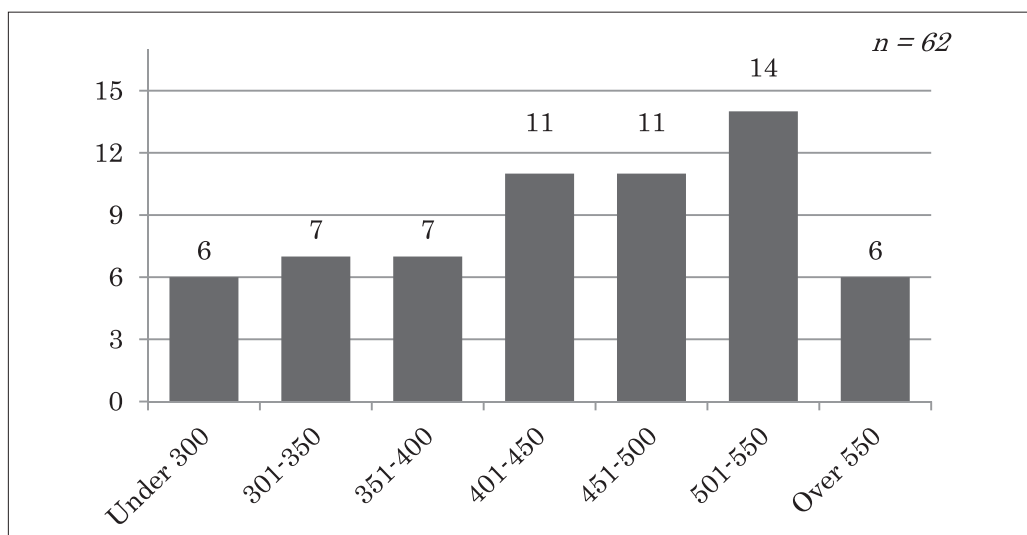


Figure 1. Histogram of the students' TOEIC scores at the first university

The second university was a low level coed school, the students were social science majors, and there were 30 students in one class. Before the semester started, all the students took the TOEIC Bridge test. Using TOEIC's conversion chart (一般財団法人 国際ビジネスコミュニケーション協会, 2006), all of the students were between a 250 and 280 TOEIC score, with an average score of 260.

2. Research period

Classes were held during the fall semester of 2013 for the first university, and during the spring semester of 2014 for the second. Classes at the first university met twice a week for 45 minutes for fourteen weeks. Classes at the second university met once a week for three hours for fifteen weeks.

It should be noted that there is a large difference between class lengths and total time in the classroom between the two schools. Although the number of times that classes were held for the first university were nearly double that of the second university, classes in the second university received more than double the total amount of instruction time.

3. Instruction

There was one instructor, the author of this article, for all five classes in both universities. There were no assigned materials or textbooks, so only the materials being tested in this study were used in the classroom.

4. Subject

The classes were held during the fall semester of 2013 for the first university, and during the spring semester of 2014 for the second university. According to Aubrey (2010), speaking and listening classes in Japan should have to have materials which achieve topic relevancy in order to increase the students' willingness to communicate. As such, the topic covered in the first university was studying abroad, and the topic covered in the second university was making friends with a foreign student.

5. Implementation

As there was a level discrepancy between the two universities, the way the classes were organized was slightly different. Similar to the previous study, activities in the first university consisted of story, story-telling, VSR, and Conversation Cards. However, as the students in the second university were lower, adjustments had to be made to accommodate their level. In response to this, activities in the second university only consisted of story, VSR, and pronunciation practice.

6. Activities

The descriptions of the story, story-telling, and VSR activities used in this research, can be found in the previous study (French, 2012). The Conversation Cards activity was changed, and will therefore be redefined, along with pronunciation practice, below.

Conversation Cards

Conversation Cards begins by giving students a sheet of paper with nine question words: who, what, where, when, why, how, do, is/are, and have. The teacher then gives the students a topic relevant to their daily lives, such as: music, vacations, hobbies, etc, and has the students make one question that starts with each question word. While the students are writing, the teacher walks around the class and corrects the students'

grammar.

Once the students are done writing the questions, the teacher has the students find a partner. The teacher then gives each student pair 9 cards (one for each question word), and gives them 45 seconds to memorize their questions. After the 45 seconds are over, the teacher instructs the students to turn over their papers, so they cannot look at them anymore, and do rock-paper-scissors. The winner gets the cards.

Once the students are ready, the teacher tells the students to start using the cards. The winner shows one of the cards to his/her partner, their partner asks a question which begins with that word, and the original partner answers the question and shows the next card. This continues for 1-2 minutes depending on student level, and then the teacher tells the students to stop and memorize their questions for 45 seconds again. The partners then switch, turn over their papers, and start using the cards again, with the winner now being the one to ask the questions. After each student has had a chance to ask questions, the teacher instructs the students to find a new partner and the process is repeated with successive partners until the teacher feels that the students are comfortable with the questions for that topic. The activity is now over.

Pronunciation practice

Pronunciation practice is the activity that followed VSR for students in the second university. In the beginning, students were given worksheets which taught them some aspects of American English suprasegmental pronunciation. The aspects covered in this class were: double sound reduction, linking words, and other common reductions.

Once students were able to show that they were able to produce the correct suprasegmental pronunciation of example phrases and sentences for the aspects listed above, students were instructed to produce the correct suprasegmental pronunciation of seven of the sentences in their current chapter in VSR. If students were able to say the sentences they chose correctly, then they received a 100% for pronunciation for the day. If they were not, they had to go to the back of the line and try to say the sentences they were unable to produce correctly again. Like VSR, once the students were able to pass this goal they received a 100% regardless if they were able to pass on the first time or the fifth.

7. Research Methodology

Students were given surveys in Japanese at the end of the semester which asked questions about the test class, the students' other classes, and other questions about VSR (Appendix A for original survey, Appendix B for English translation). Students responded to the questions about the test class and their other classes via a five point Likert scale in four different areas: likeability, motivation, perceived improvement, and losing track of time. The Likert scale was arranged so that five was the highest score and one was the lowest. Afterwards, the students responded to the other questions about VSR by rating their emotional comfort level during different parts of the activity on a one to five Likert scale, and by choosing all areas of the class which applied to their motivation to study or their perceived improvement.

Participation in the surveys was voluntary, and when the surveys were finished, students placed the completed surveys on a desk away from the teacher to ensure anonymity. In the first university, 65 of the 72 students turned in a survey. In the second university, 28 of the 30 students turned in a survey.

8. Results

As in the previous study, classes in both universities which contained VSR (and Conversation Cards for the first university) received higher scores in terms of likeability, motivation, and perceived improvement than the students' other English classes. In addition, the test classes also received higher scores for losing track of time than the students' other English classes. Figure 2 shows the average scores for each category for the first university.

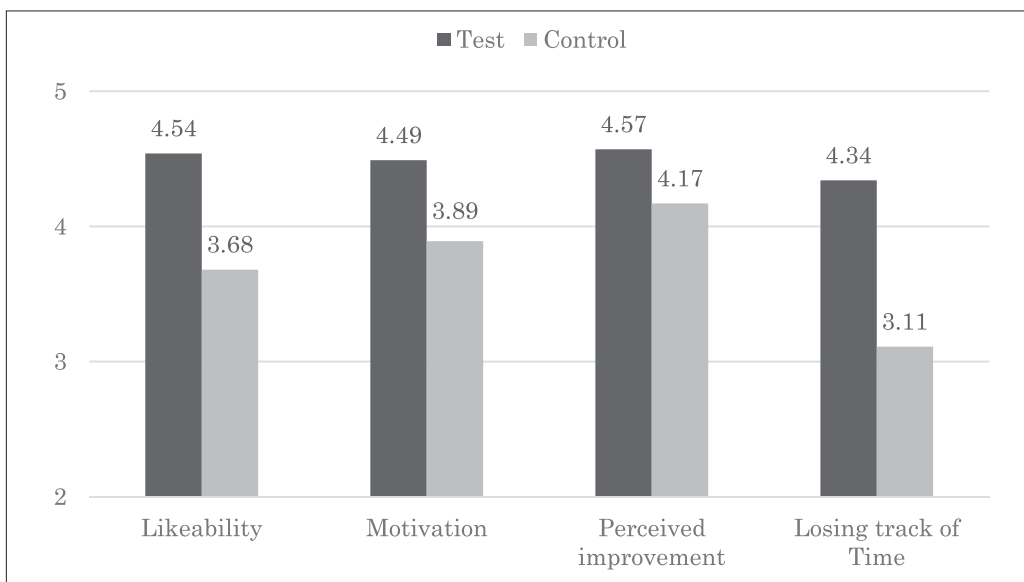


Figure 2. First university comparison to other classes

Figure 3 shows that the test class with the second university received similar scores. However, the students' other English classes for the second university had much lower scores than the students' other English classes from the first university.

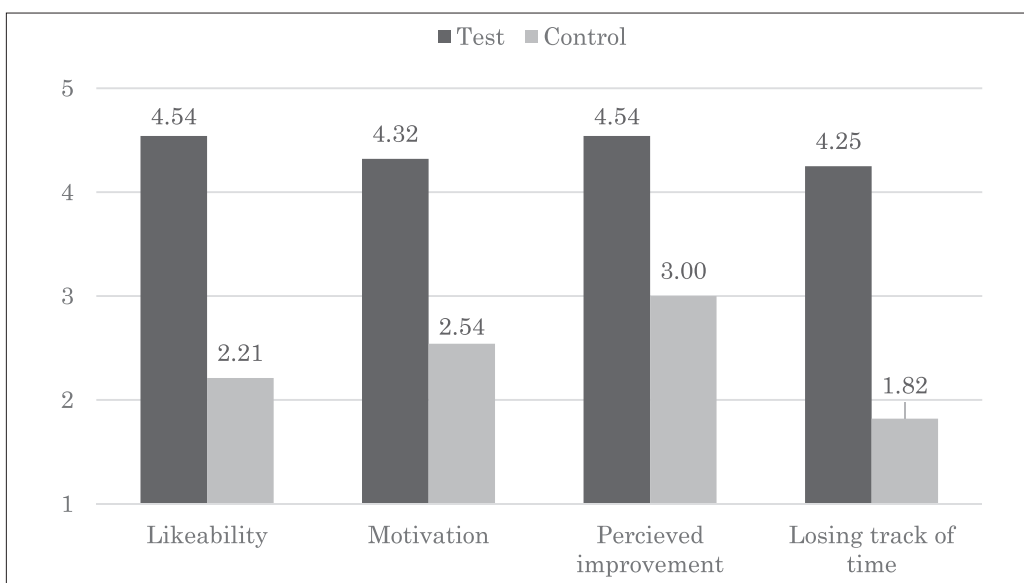


Figure 3. Second university comparison to other classes

With regards to the questions on emotional comfort during VSR, students were generally emotionally comfortable during VSR lessons. The students were asked to note their emotional comfort with regards to three aspects of VSR, which were: (1) if they felt more comfortable being able to prepare for the conversations instead of immediately speaking with their partner, (2) if they felt more comfortable knowing what might be said during conversation practices, and (3) if they felt more comfortable knowing that they were able to retake the interview test if they failed the first time. Students in the first university gave scores of 4.37 for conversation preparation, 4.69 to knowing what might be said, and 4.75 to being able to try again. Scores in the second university were 4.29 for conversation preparation, 4.71 to knowing what might be said, and 4.68 to being able to try again.

Finally, students were asked to choose which parts of VSR increased their motivation, and which parts of VSR made them feel like they improved (multiple areas could be chosen). The choices were: (1) studying real English conversation, (2) writing practice answers beforehand, (3) the variability of the conversations, (4) practicing with multiple partners, (5) having a high speed interview test, (6) passing the interview test, (7) being able to study comfortably, and (8) none of the above.

With respect to motivation in the first university, students chose studying real English conversations first with 78% of students choosing it, writing practice answers second at 35%, and conversation variability third at 34% (Figure 4). For perceived improvement, students chose studying real English conversation the most at 80%, writing practice answers second at 46%, and having a high speed interview test third at 40% (Figure 5).

With respect to motivation in the second university, students chose passing the interview test the most at 50%, emotional comfort second at 46%, and studying real conversations at 43% (Figure 6). For perceived improvement, students chose studying real conversations the most at 43%, writing practice answers second at 36%, and emotional comfort third at 32% (Figure 7).

As well, no student from either university chose “none of the above” for either motivation or perceived improvement.

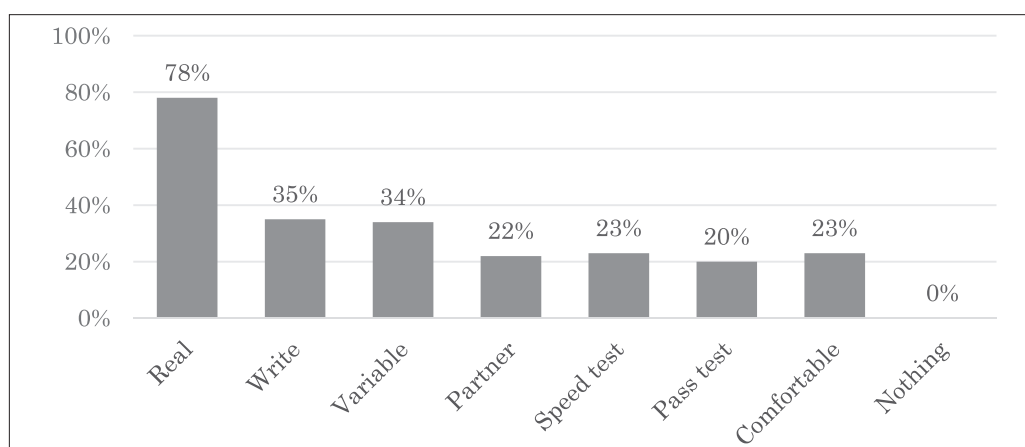


Figure 4. Reason for motivation due to VSR in the first university

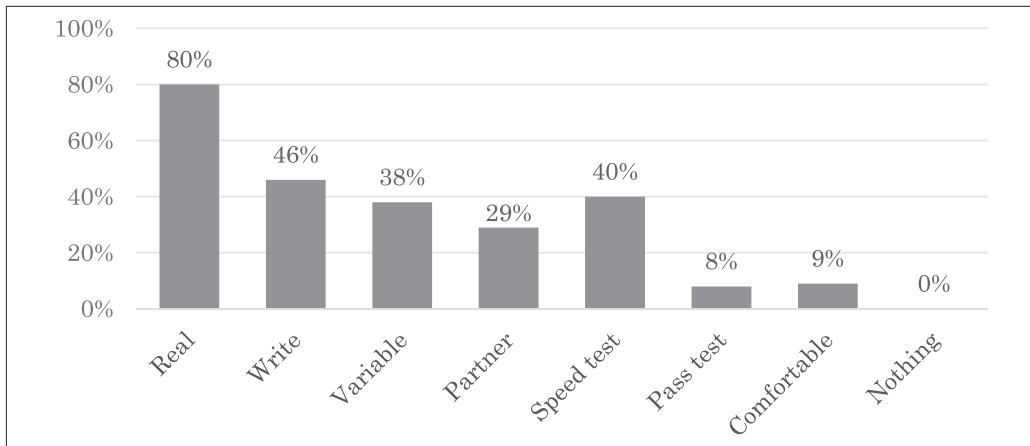


Figure 5. Reason for perceived improvement due to VSR in the first university

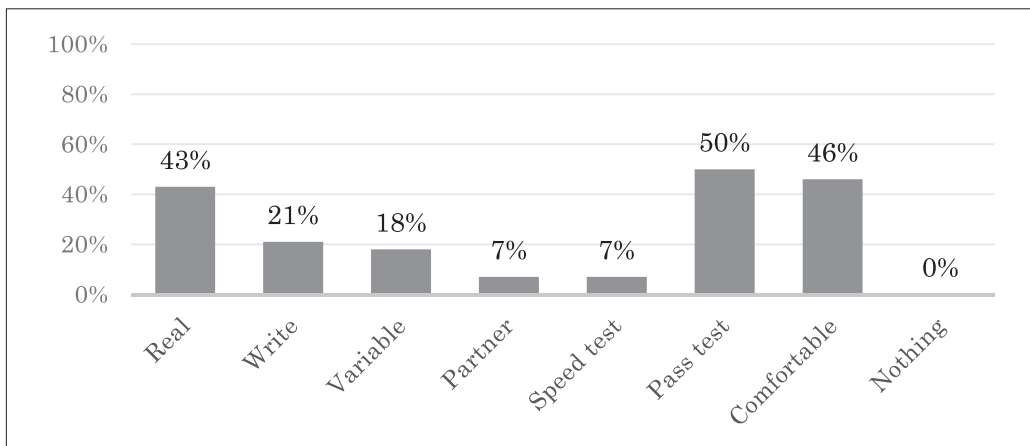


Figure 6. Reason for motivation due to VSR in the second university

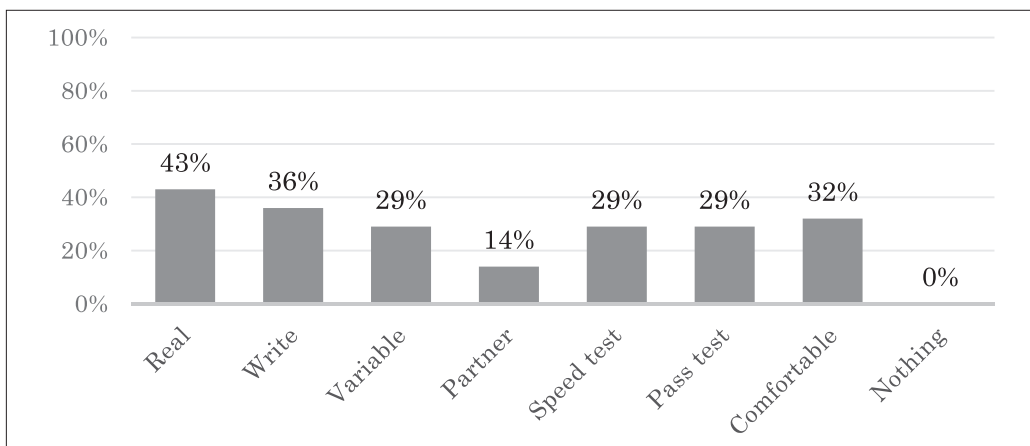


Figure 7. Reason for perceived improvement due to VSR in the second university

9. Discussion

It should be noted that although the students in the second university rated their other English classes much lower than the students in the first university, the test class received fairly equivalent scores at both universities. This serves to show that VSR can be used effectively to teach English conversation to low level non-major university students, as well as point out the fact that even students who have done poorly in English classes until university can become engaged and benefit from their English classes provided the correct materials

are utilized.

Another discussion point for these results is flow. 80% of students in the first university, and 79% of the students in the second university agreed or strongly agreed that they lost track of time in the test class. However, only 34% of students in the first university, and only 4% of the students in the second university agreed or strongly agreed that they lost track of time in their other classes. As VSR activities inherently meet five of the eight common circumstances of flow – (1) tasks must have a reasonable chance of being completed, (2) concentration on the task must be possible, (3) the task has clear goals, (4) the task provides immediate feedback, and (6) the person is able to exercise a sense of control over his/her actions – and the majority of students felt that they forgot about time during class, it seems very likely that students in VSR classes experience flow. As experiencing flow leads to higher levels of intrinsic motivation and higher quality time on task, this may possibly be the reason why students gave higher scores to the test class than their other English classes for motivation and perceived improvement.

The next discussion point is on the topics of emotional comfort during VSR activities and its relation to students' motivation and perceived improvement during the activity. Although the majority of students in both universities felt emotionally comfortable in class, the first university did not rank emotional comfort as one of the top reasons why they felt motivated or why they felt their English improved. However, the second university ranked it as their number two reason for motivation, and their number three reason for perceived improvement. As the students' in the second university were low level non-English majors, it is very possible that English conversation is somewhat intimidating for them and the way VSR is set up allowed them to feel more at ease when studying and preparing for interview tests.

The final discussion point is on the students' top choices for why they felt motivated and why they felt they improved. First of all, it is very important to note that out of the 83 students who turned in a survey in both universities, every student felt that there was at least something that motivated them and helped them improve their English. Second, "studying real English conversation" was the number one reason for both motivation and perceived improvement for the first university, and the number three and number one reason for motivation and perceived improvement respectively for the second. The students made it quite clear that they feel that VSR helps them study real English conversation. Third, it is very interesting that "passing the test" was the number one reason for students' motivation in the second university, but was not in the top three for perceived improvement. The reason as to why "passing the test" was the number one reason for motivation in the second university, but not for perceived improvement (and not for the first university), may be explained by the reward stage of *reward probability* (French, 2012; Fiorillo, Tobler, & Schultz, 2003). The reward stage of reward probability states that the lower a person's confidence in completing a task, the higher the dopamine reward received when being able to accomplish or complete it. As the students in the second university were low-level non English majors, it is very possible that they had not had much success with English conversation in the past, and that passing the tests gave them a huge dopamine rush / confidence boost / motivational surge. Finally, it should be noted that every point but "practicing with multiple partners" and "none of the above" made it to one of the top three reasons at some point in the study. It can therefore be said that VSR has the flexibility to appeal to students in a number of different educational situations.

IV. Conclusion

This research has shown that classes with VSR (and Conversation Cards for the first university) receive higher scores than students' other English classes in terms of likeability, motivation, perceived improvement, and losing track of time. As well, students feel comfortable with VSR, and although this comfort does not always leave an impression on the students in terms of their motivation and perceived improvement, this comfort is very important in some situations. Furthermore, students believe that VSR helps them study real English conversation, and it has a number of different elements which can usually ensure (and in this study 100% of the time) that students will find something in VSR activities that is motivating and that helps them with their English conversation ability. VSR and Conversation Cards have once again proven themselves as effective English conversational activities.

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Appendix A
Original Survey in Japanese

1. この授業が好きですか？

いいえ	あんまり	まあまあ	ちょっと	はい
1	2	3	4	5

2. 他の英語の授業が好きですか？

いいえ	あんまり	まあまあ	ちょっと	はい
1	2	3	4	5

3. この授業ではあなたは英語を勉強する気ができますか？

いいえ	あんまり	まあまあ	ちょっと	はい
1	2	3	4	5

4. 他の英語の授業ではあなたは英語を勉強する気ができますか？

いいえ	あんまり	まあまあ	ちょっと	はい
1	2	3	4	5

5. この授業はあなたの英語能力を上げると思いますか？

いいえ	あんまり	まあまあ	ちょっと	はい
1	2	3	4	5

6. 他の英語の授業はあなたの英語能力を上げると思いますか？

いいえ	あんまり	まあまあ	ちょっと	はい
1	2	3	4	5

7. この授業では時間が立つのを忘れますか？

いいえ	あんまり	まあまあ	ちょっと	はい
1	2	3	4	5

8. 他の英語の授業では時間が立つのを忘れますか？

いいえ	あんまり	まあまあ	ちょっと	はい
1	2	3	4	5

9. あなたは突然会話を練習するよりも、その前に返事を考えて書いておくほうが気楽にできると感じますか？

いいえ あんまり まあまあ ちょっと はい
 1 2 3 4 5

10. インタビューテストの時、先生が何を言い出すかを知らないよりも、前もって15の文から出ることを知っておいたほうが気楽にできると感じますか？

いいえ あんまり まあまあ ちょっと はい
 1 2 3 4 5

11. インタビューテストの時、一回のテストで不合格になるより、落ちてでもまだテストを受けられるほうが気楽にできると感じますか？

いいえ あんまり まあまあ ちょっと はい
 1 2 3 4 5

12. あなたにとって物語の会話の中で英語の勉強をする気を起こさせるのは何ですか？
 (複数選べます。)

- | | |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| A) 実際の英会話を勉強すること | B) 文章の返事を考えて書くこと |
| C) 会話の可変性 | D) 多数のパートナーと練習すること |
| E) 高速英語でのインタビューテスト | F) テストに合格すること |
| G) 気楽に勉強できること | H) 何もする気を起こさせない |

13. 物語の会話の何があなたの英語能力を上げると思いますか？
 (複数選べます。)

- | | |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| A) 実際の英会話を勉強すること | B) 文章の返事を考えて書くこと |
| C) 会話の可変性 | D) 多数のパートナーと練習すること |
| E) 高速英語でのインタビューテスト | F) テストに合格すること |
| G) 気楽に勉強できること | H) 何も英語能力をあげない |

Appendix B
Translated Survey in English

1. Do you like this class?

No	Not very	Neutral	A little	Yes
1	2	3	4	5

2. Do you like your other English classes?

No	Not very	Neutral	A little	Yes
1	2	3	4	5

3. Does this class raise your motivation to study English?

No	Not very	Neutral	A little	Yes
1	2	3	4	5

4. Do your other English classes raise your motivation to study English?

No	Not very	Neutral	A little	Yes
1	2	3	4	5

5. Do you think this class raises your English ability?

No	Not very	Neutral	A little	Yes
1	2	3	4	5

6. Do you think your other English classes raise your English ability?

No	Not very	Neutral	A little	Yes
1	2	3	4	5

7. Do you forget about the passing of time in this class?

No	Not very	Neutral	A little	Yes
1	2	3	4	5

8. Do you forget about the passing of time in your other classes?

No	Not very	Neutral	A little	Yes
1	2	3	4	5

9. Instead of diving directly into practicing conversation, does it make you feel more comfortable if you're able to write practice answers first before engaging?

No	Not very	Neutral	A little	Yes
1	2	3	4	5

10. For the interview test, instead of not knowing what the teacher will say, does it make you more comfortable if you know that the teacher will only say things from a list of 15 sentences?

No	Not very	Neutral	A little	Yes
1	2	3	4	5

11. For the interview test, does it make you feel more comfortable knowing that you'll be able to take the test more than once if you fail?

No	Not very	Neutral	A little	Yes
1	2	3	4	5

12. What areas of VSR motivate you to study the most? (Select all that apply)

- | | |
|---|--|
| A) Studying real English conversation | B) Writing practice answers beforehand |
| C) The variability of the conversations | D) Practicing with multiple partners |
| E) Having a high speed interview test | F) Passing the interview test |
| G) Being able to study comfortably | H) None of the above |

13. What areas of VSR improve your English the most? (Select all that apply)

- | | |
|---|--|
| A) Studying real English conversation | B) Writing practice answers beforehand |
| C) The variability of the conversations | D) Practicing with multiple partners |
| E) Having a high speed interview test | F) Passing the interview test |
| G) Being able to study comfortably | H) None of the above |