

応用研究論文

Writing versus Speaking: Effects of Classroom Oral Practice on Speaking Performance of Japanese EFL Learners

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The importance of analyzing second-language (L2) acquisition has long been recognized. However, research that examined the progress of the L2 acquisition of learners is minimal, whereas many teachers of English continue to require useful and practical methods for enhancing the speaking skills of students. Therefore, we examine the effectiveness of long-term teaching plans and determine practical methods for assessing the development of speaking skills after conducting several teaching methods. Moreover, this study evaluates the effectiveness of speaking practices over four months of English classes. The researcher prepared one topic for each lesson and instructed the students, who were divided into two groups, to discuss the topic in pairs. The students in the two groups were given the same topic, but different teaching methods were employed. The students in Class A used model conversation sheets to prepare brief speeches, whereas those in Class B wrote brief essays about the topic before the speaking practice. To measure progress, two writing tests were conducted in July and January. A comparison of the two tests demonstrated that Class A students displayed better progress in terms of fluency and complexity. The longitudinal and classroom-based nature of this study is unique.

Keywords: speaking skill, conversation guidance, pair work

Introduction

In Japan in general and in Akita in particular, the strong demand continues for effective methods for teaching English conversation in schools. It has been a long-term, serious problem especially for teachers in senior and junior high schools. Therefore, the current study was conducted to develop new teaching methods, and consequently, to contribute to the literature and to meet the demand in Akita prefecture.

Following the rapid development of globalization, universities in Japan have recognized the heightened importance of English-speaking lessons. Thus, the number of studies that examined teaching methods for English-speaking lessons has been considerable. However, no truly effective teaching method has been established. Although many teachers of English as a second language have recognized the need to measure the effects of conversation teaching methods, research that examined the benefits of long-term speaking lessons

has been minimal. Nevertheless, an increasing number of studies have examined the importance of the so-called scaffolding in teaching (Greenfield, 1984; Storch, 2002; Wood., et al., 1976; Zarandi & Rahbar, 2016). Donato (1994) has illustrated that students in pairs can provide scaffolded help. However, further investigation into scaffolding is required, especially in English-speaking lessons. To address this need, the current study introduced a teaching method that includes giving oral lessons for a uniquely extensive duration of one semester at a university in Japan and measured the effects. Several researchers, such as Bygate and Samuda (2005) and McDonough (2004), have recognized the importance of long-term lessons. In addition, many teachers of English in Japan have become engaged in long-term education at universities. Against this background, the objective of this study is twofold. First, it intends to elucidate the effects of the guidance and scaffolding of Japanese teachers in English-speaking lessons. Second, it aims to

examine the development of the speaking skills of students after participating in long-term speaking practice.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Can the English-speaking lessons of Japanese teachers enhance the speaking skills of students?

RQ2. What are the effects of English-speaking lessons on the speaking skills of students?

Participants

The study recruited second-year students at a Japanese university with ages ranging from 19 to 21 years. The students formed two groups, namely, Class A, which consists of engineering students, and Class B, which is composed of students in economics courses. The students took a compulsory general English class during their first two years. In this university, some of the English classes are conducted over the course of one academic year, such that the students took the same English class throughout one year. In this manner, the students received classes in conversational English throughout the year, which is a unique feature of the university. In general, classes are composed of 23 to 26 students. Thus, students who took the classes for two consecutive semesters were selected as the research subjects ($N = 23$). This study covers their development in the second semester. However, speaking practice was inaugurated at the first semester and continued across the two semesters.

Guidance on Conversational English

In each general English class, the researcher gave the students a short conversation task that lasted 5–10 min. The task required the students to discuss a given topic in English for 2 min. According to Swain (1985),

providing students with as many chances as possible is important for teachers in producing output. The students were required to conduct this activity in pairs; each student in a pair spoke for 2 min about the same topic. Many studies have highlighted the benefits of pair work (e.g., Adams, 2007; Donato, 2004; Gass & Varonis, 1989; Richards, 2008; Storch, 2002; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). The researcher prepared the topics for each lesson, which were not based on the textbooks used in class. The topics were carefully selected to enable the students to tackle the task of speaking English without feeling incapable or stressed. The teacher used the following criteria to decide whether a candidate topic was appropriate: a topic familiar to the students, a concept or object that can be easily described, or an event that happened during high school. For example, the students narrated their summer vacation, their final year of high school, and their hometowns.

Initially, the Japanese students found difficulty in discussing these topics in English for 2 min. When they started in April, they were hesitant to speak. However, they gradually started to speak for longer periods. By the second semester, the students were able to continue speaking for longer than the required 2 min. The pair work activity applied in the classroom enabled them to improve their English-speaking skills. Moreover, a comparative study could be conducted and was necessary, because the same speaking activity was adopted in two classes. However, the practice methods introduced for each class were different. In Class A, the learning material and the topic were given to the students during the English class and before the speaking practice. The researcher developed the learning material by providing model sentences to help the students discuss the topic. The model sentences contained blanks that the students were required to fill, which thus enabled them to speak, comparatively easily, for 2 min. Oftentimes, multiple choices could be used to fill in the blanks. Example 1 depicts a model speech form.

Example 1. *Model speech form*

Let me tell you about my summer vacation. I went to () (with ()/alone). I went there because (I ()/there was ()). I went there by (), and it took about () hours.

Each form of learning material listed 15 to 20 sample sentences. According to the skills of the students, many students could read all sentences within 2 min, whereas the opposite is true for the others. If they used all the prepared sentences before the target time, then they were encouraged to continue the discussion without the help of the sample sentences, where included specific expressions used in various daily situations that the students learned in English classes. The objective of this exercise to enhance the performance and motivation of students to speak. Similar to previous studies that provided valuable insights into frequently used expressions, the students could easily acquire and use the expressions provided by the teacher (Adams, 2007), whereas L2 learners should learn expressions they can frequently use in conversations (Richards, 2008; Schmitt & Carter, 2004). After receiving the practice sheets, the students were given 1 min to prepare their narratives. Therefore, students in Class A received a preparation time of 1 min before taking turns with a partner to speak for 2 min each.

A different style of preparation was applied to Class B. The students were not given any model sentences. Instead, they were assigned a topic and given 5 min to plan and write down their narratives in relation to the topic. Thus, the students were given a longer preparation time without support from the teacher. During 5 min of within-task planning, the students were allowed to use a dictionary and their smartphones. In other words, students in Class B planned their narrative for 5 min before speaking in pairs for 2 min each after the topic was given.

Speaking activities were conducted in both classes for the entire school year. In the second semester, students in Class A were given more expressive and specific model sentences, which was the only

amendment throughout the year. The present study followed concepts from previous studies, which indicated that the effectiveness of the assessment of the speaking or writing skills L2 learners can be conducted by dividing them into two groups and assigning different tasks (Ellis & Yuan, 2005; Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993; Swain & Lapkin, 2001).

Research Design

The research design mainly incorporated a quantitative approach. However, the researcher intended to examine the qualitative aspects of the output performance of the students by focusing on the quality of their English use. As Riggensbach (1991) cited, many researchers have encountered problems when measuring the language skills of students; therefore, various methods should be applied. For example, Adams (2007) conducted grammar tests, whereas Ellis and Yuan (2005) applied oral and written tasks. To examine the development of students in terms of speaking performance, the current study adopted a writing task. Although interview tests for each student may have been appropriate, they were not applied because the lessons should be conducted in the classroom setting. Thus, each student was required to complete a writing task in the final classes for the first and second semesters. They were tasked to write a self-introduction essay in 5 min. All students in Classes A and B who attended the English classes for two consecutive semesters (N = 46) wrote two essays: one in July and one in January for 92 essays. Although different methods for teaching were applied to the two groups of students, the experimental conditions were identical.

Analysis

Analysis of the speaking skills of L2 learners requires a common focus on three areas of output, namely, fluency, complexity, and accuracy (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Koizumi, 2005; Skehan, 1996; Skehan &

Foster, 1999). Thus, the current study investigated the following features of speech: the number of English and Japanese words (fluency), the total number of verbs, adjectives, and adverbs and certain expressions used (complexity); and the total number of errors (accuracy). To evaluate the speaking performance of L2 learners, many researchers have examined the number of words used (Mehnert, 1998; Tavakoli & Rezazadeh, 2014; Wang, 2014; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). Additionally, Foster, Tonkyn, and Wigglesworth (2000) recognized very short parts of speeches as utterances. In daily conversation, people appreciate not only the fluency and complexity of the speech of others but also the quality of expressions used. Thus, this study examined two forms of expressions peculiar to the participants, namely, expressions about other people and time lapses.

Results

This section presents the results taken from the 92 essays collected from the students. Table 1 presents a distinguishable difference in the average number of words written by each student. In the second task, the students in Class A produced slightly more words, whereas the total number of words for students in Class B decreased. Concluding that the students in Class A developed high-quality speaking skills is difficult. However, the results indicate that the teaching method applied to Class A exerted a better effect on fluency than that applied to Class B.

Table 1. *Average number of words produced by each student*

	Date	Class A	Class B
First task	July 30	45.50	41.20
Second task	January 30	46.13	38.10
Improvement rate		+1.38%	-7.52%

Table 2 illustrates the results obtained for the number of Japanese words produced by the students.

English words adopted from the Japanese language, such as “sushi” or “judo,” were excluded because they are commonly used as English words in English-speaking countries.

Table 2. *Average number of Japanese words*

	Date	Class A	Class B
First task	July 30	3.90	4.20
Second task	January 30	4.40	5.26
Improvement rate		+12.82%	+25.24%

The study infers that tendency observed in the written essays, that is, they included a certain amount of Japanese words, is relatively natural given that task introduced was an essay on self-introduction and that the students were required to write about themselves. At the very least, they needed to write their name, birthplace, or college in the Japanese language. In the second task (January), the number of Japanese words increased by 12.82% and 25.24% for Classes A and B, respectively, which indicates a distinct difference between the two classes. Thus, the students in Class A applied more English words (960 words) compared with those in Class B (756 words).

Table 3 depicts the number of verbs used by the students. Verb forms, such as the tense of the verb, were not considered. Thus, different forms of one verb, such as “take,” “takes,” and “took,” were counted as three words.

Table 3. *Total number of verbs in each class*

	Date	Class A	Class B
First task	July 30	118	112
Second task	January 30	102	100
Improvement rate		-13.56%	-10.71%

The number of verbs used in both classes decreased between the two tasks at similar negative rates. Similar results were also observed for the forms of verbs used. The students in Class A used 40 forms of verbs in the first and second tasks. Meanwhile, the students in Class

B 23 and 26 verbs for the two tasks, respectively. As such, no clear change was noted between July and January in terms of the frequency of the verbs used for both classes.

However, several differences were noted between the two classes regarding the use of adjectives and adverbs (Table 4). Despite many instances of overlapping adjectives and adverbs (e.g., one student used “favorite” three times in his essay), each adjective or adverb was counted as one word.

Table 4. *Total numbers of adjectives and adverbs*

		Date	Class A	Class B
Adjectives	First task	July 30	74	64
	Second task	January 30	62	28
	Improvement rate		-16.22%	-56.25%
Adverbs	First task	July 30	37	34
	Second task	January 30	38	11
	Improvement rate		2.70%	-67.65%

The students in Class A used a similar amount of adjectives and adverbs in the first and second tasks. However, a notable difference was observed between the numbers of adjectives (a decrease of 56.25%) and adverbs (a decrease of 67.65%) used by the students in Class B between the first and second tasks. One of the reasons for these decreases is that the students tended to use more Japanese words in the second task. Thus, the students in Class B failed to improve their fluency.

The essays were also measured in terms of quality based on meanings and use of words. First, the subjects of the sentences were examined. In the majority of cases, the students wrote about aspects related to themselves for the self-introduction task, such as their life, family, or memories. As a result, they tended to write many sentences beginning with “I” or “My.” Although writing in the first person is not a problem, different expressions and third person sentences can be used to vary the writing style. Notably, a few students in Class A varied their writing in this manner. Table 5 presents the number of sentences that did not start with “I” or “My.”

Table 5. *Number of third-person sentences*

	Date	Class A	Class B
First task	July 30	15	16
Second task	January 30	33	11
Improvement rate		120.00%	-31.25%

In the first task, the frequency of sentences without “I” or “My” was nearly the same for both classes (i.e., 15 and 16 in Classes A and B). However, a significant difference was observed in the results for the second task. Although the students in Class B created a slightly less number of sentences in the third person (11), the number of students in Class A that used third person sentences more than doubled (33), which indicates that students in Class A used a greater variety of sentences. For example, “I live in Tokyo. Tokyo is very big.” Although the contents did not change dramatically for Class A, the writing skills of the students were enhanced. In their self-introduction, they no longer used first person sentences but used other forms of sentences to present their narratives in English.

We then examined the three basic verb tenses, namely, past, present, and future.

Table 6. *Number of words relating to tense*

		Date	Class A	Class B
Past	First task	July 30	8	6
	Second task	January 30	5	4
	Improvement rate		-37.50%	33.33%
Present	First task	July 30	3	4
	Second task	January 30	4	5
	Improvement rate		33.33%	25.00%
Future	First task	July 30	1	2
	Second task	January 30	3	1
	Improvement rate		200.00%	50.00%

Notably, the use of the past tense decreased slightly for both classes. In the self-introduction task, discussing a past event was easier for the students instead of something about the future. However, the opposite is true for the future tense for Class A; where the students opted to use less past tense but more future tense of verbs.

During the second semester, the students in Class A learned and practiced how to explain and express their thoughts using various methods. This guidance was adopted to enhance their ability to render themselves understandable in English using various expressions. Thus, the students in Class A intended to establish genuine communication with their partners, which may have been rendered easier by the guidance of the teacher.

Other results indicate that students in Class A acquired stronger communication skills through the speaking practice. For example, they spoke for 2 min and picked up new skills that enabled them to present a clear basis of their discussion by explaining their intended meaning through another method. Table 7 presents the use of explanatory and reasoning sentences for each class.

Table 7. *Numbers of explanatory and reasoning sentences*

	Date	Class A	Class B
Explanatory	First task July 30	3	2
	Second task January 30	12	2
Reasoning	First task July 30	1	3
	Second task January 30	7	1

The results demonstrate that the students in Class A used more explanatory and reasoning sentences during the second task. Moreover, the study identified two types of explanatory sentences in their essays. The first pertains to the explanation of a concept unknown to the partner, such as “I have A-001. A-001 is a road bike.” The second denoted a style called supplementary explanation, such as “I went on a trip. I went to Tokyo.” These forms of explanatory sentences deemed relatively useful for clarifying unknown topics in the conversation, which rendered the speeches of the students more expressive. The students in Class A learned and practiced using useful words, such as “because” and “for example,” in the second semester. Their practice achieved a measure of success, because they used “because” eight times, out of which seven were used to put forth their reasons for their deeds or decisions. The students in Class A

successfully shared their thoughts and feelings in a more expressive manner. In other words, they adopted a more positive attitude, which is considered a product of the guidance of the teacher for English communication during the second semester.

The following results also support the success of the students in Class A in terms of engaging in mutual communication with their partners. Table 8 presents the number of greeting expressions used by the students in the two classes.

Table 8. *Number of greeting expressions*

	Date	Class A	Class B
First task	July 30	6	4
Second task	January 30	7	0

In the first task in July, the students in both classes used greeting expressions for four to six times. Greetings are a basic means of establishing mutual communication with others. However, the students in Class B used no greeting expressions in the second task, whereas those for students in Class A slightly increased.

Finally, to assess the accuracy of the speeches, we examined the number of errors in the essays. Spelling errors were ignored since the study aimed to measure speaking performance. Table 9 shows the number of errors for each class.

Table 9. *Number of errors in each class*

	Date	Class A	Class B
First task	July 30	21	23
Second task	January 30	25	22
Improvement rate		19.05%	-4.35%

In terms of the total number of English words, Table 9 indicates that the number of errors for Class A increased, whereas those in Class B slightly decreased. These results indicate that each student made approximately one grammatical or wording error in 5 min of English writing, which suggests that the level of their output skills were high. Moreover, the number of errors did not

increase in Class B, which indicates that the writing task was more effective for enhancing the skills in writing English sentences correctly for the students in Class B. Thus, the teaching method that required students to write English sentences for 5 min using smartphones and dictionaries benefited their ability to write correctly and accurately in English.

Discussion

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Can speaking lessons from a Japanese teacher enhance the speaking skills of students?

RQ2. What are the effects of the speaking lesson from a Japanese teacher on the speaking skills of students?

With regard to RQ1, the speaking lesson was considered effective. In Class A, where the teacher prepared practice aid materials, the students produced increased numbers of words and third person sentences compared with the students in Class B. In addition, students in Class A successfully applied more explanatory and reasoning sentences. Thus, the study infers that the guidance from the teacher exerted educational effects on the speaking performance of the students, particularly in terms of fluency and complexity.

For RQ2, the students obtained skills for building mutual communication in English, especially the students in Class A, who also expanded their narratives using rationales and examples. The results indicate that the students learned several useful expressions in the classroom, which they could use in real conversations in English. By contrast, the students in Class B, who were tasked with more writing tasks, produced fewer errors in the second writing task, which demonstrates that the writing tasks benefited the students' ability to write English sentences in an accurate manner.

Conclusion

The guidance of the teacher was considered successful in developing the fluency and complexity of the students. The English-speaking practice in ordinary English classes improved the learning outcomes of students by enhancing their speaking skills. However, although the guidance was deemed for the students, a practice time of 2 min per lesson is extremely short. Thus, additional time should be allotted to speaking practice inside and outside the classroom. In many cases, Japanese students hesitate to use the English language, especially with other Japanese students. Thus, giving presenting them with increased chances to use English, with the teacher's scaffolding, is an essential and truly effective method.

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〔 令和 3 年 7 月 30 日 受付
令和 3 年 9 月 1 日 受理 〕

