

Influencing Speaking Attitudes Among Beginning Level Japanese University English Learners

日本の大学における初級レベルの英語学習者への
話す態度への影響

EDWARDS, Michael

(○○○○○○○)

Abstract

This research focuses on an information exchange activity originally designed for in-class speaking practice. The task-based activity, *3-Way Speaking*, was implemented with intention to raise self-efficacy in students. This report explains the reasoning behind the design, its adaptation for online implementation, and the extent to which the students' responses indicated perceived improvement in English speaking abilities.

この調査は、授業での会話練習用に考案された、情報交換のための学習活動に焦点をおいたものである。課題を基にした「3人でおこなう学習活動:3 Way Speaking」では、学生の自己効力感を伸ばすために準備され試行されたものである。この調査報告書では、この学習活動を考案した理由、オンライン授業で活用のしかたを述べ、さらに英語を話す力が向上したことを示唆する学生からの回答を紹介する。

Keywords: self-efficacy, EFL, task-based, online instruction

自己効力感、EFL、与えられた課題をもとにした、オンライン授業

1. Introduction

Second language teachers are often revising their teaching methods and strategies to best suit their students' academic needs. How best to positively influence the feelings and judgements students have towards learning language should be included in any strategy preference. In the context of Japanese universities and junior colleges it can at times be challenging to convince beginning level students to believe that improving their spoken English is more than simply something to wish for. Developing self-efficacy in students is one important way which can help students feel better about expressing themselves in the foreign language.

The 2020 academic year brought new demands to English instruction as a large percentage of instruction shifted online. Despite the hurdles presented to teachers and students alike, the following paper aims to illustrate how an activity designed to promote speaking self-efficacy among students in a classroom was successfully implemented to an online learning environment. Responses from beginning level junior college students provided at the end of the year indicate that with careful implementation, self-efficacy in speaking English can be cultivated.

2. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, defined by the Stanford University psychologist, Albert Bandura was used to describe an individual's belief in their ability to successfully complete a task in a particular situation. Bandura (1977) determined four sources from which a student infers information that influence self-efficacious development: 1. Mastery experiences or, as Margolis and McCabe (2006) label it, enactive mastery. This is where an individual recognizes the degree to which they succeed on tasks and is considered to be the most influential of the four sources. Having mastered or successfully completed a task demonstrates to the individual that accomplishing the task is in fact, possible, (Bandura, 1997) It is important that successes are attained early on in a particular task to establish a sense of efficacy and then be built upon. Throughout the process of completing a task, an individual may also learn new strategies to complete the task, reinforcing the belief that employing new strategies is a way to achieve goals. 2. Vicarious experiences. Bandura (1977) explains, are important because an individual can observe successful behavior of others in a similar situation. There is a connection made between what peers do and what the individual believes they can do and this connection helps to reinforce the belief in oneself. An equally important environmental influence comes in the form of feedback, (Schunk, 2019) . 3. Verbal persuasion is an important source of self-efficacy in that it provides positive reinforcement to an individual. It is best to begin this positive verbal encouragement early on, but it can be influential in helping an individual believe in their own abilities at any stage. 4. The emotional and physiological state of an individual when taking on a particular task can also be influential in the development of an individual's sense of self-efficacy. Increasing self-

efficacy is easier when one is feeling well. (Lopez-Garrido, 2020)

2.1 *3-Way Speaking* and Self-efficacy

3-Way Speaking begins with the three members of a triad group each receiving a different article that is easy to comprehend. Each member is required to read their article and note ten words, *10 Helpful Words*, concerning the reading on a separate page. These words are then used to aid that member to explain their passage to the two other members, who take notes while listening to the explanation, within a time period of five minutes, for example. The member explaining, ideally, is to not look at the original article. This information exchange process is complete when all three members have explained their respective articles. Once all explanations have finished, the teacher offers nine quiz questions, three for each of the readings to all members. The quiz answers are reviewed at the end. Students' quiz scores are to have no bearing on students' class marks, and so there is no pressure for students in this regard. Students are informed from the beginning that the only requirement to gain points for the day is to do one's best.

Tasks assigned to students should be something within the participants reach and should not be too difficult. To promote self-efficacy in students, Shi (2015) suggests that it is necessary for teachers to understand the level of the students so that tasks can be implemented accordingly. In the case of the *3-Way Speaking* activity, the first and most important step was the selection of readings. Each member of a triad group received a reading that required little or no dictionary usage and posed no comprehension issues for the students. Several beginning level reading textbooks were reviewed before deciding on True Stories 1A, and True Stories 1B, which include nonfictional narratives at the CEFR A1 and A2 levels. The truth of the stories make the readings intriguing and add purpose to the activity. This level of reading also gives the students an immediate sense of accomplishment and eases the students into what inevitably will become a more difficult speaking exercise. It should be noted, that within the context of online instruction, deciding on this final textbook selection was made more difficult without the aid of in-class instruction where face-to-face contact makes it easier for the teacher to understand how well students may or may not understand vocabulary, grammar, and inferences in the text.

In terms of vicarious experience, when performed in the classroom where triads groups are separated around a classroom, the murmur of English created when many students are struggling with their English explanations is lost online. In the classroom setting, the students have the benefit of being aware that many others in the class are struggling with explaining their stories just as they are. Not being able to witness this in "breakout rooms" using the Zoom media application with only two or three other members represented a loss in vicarious experience in this case.

Just as would be in the classroom, encouragement was offered at every opportunity in breakout rooms. Praise of the smallest achievements; correctly used words, use of full sentences, or self-corrections when speaking was frequently pointed out. Whether in the classroom, where sitting down and joining a triad group, or when visiting a breakout room, constant verbal encouragement and assurance that progress was

being made was given in a genuine manner.

3. Research Question

1. With the four influential elements of self-efficacy development as a focus, can the information exchange activity, *3-Way Speaking*, lead students to perceive improvement in their English speaking ability?

4. Research Methods and *3-Way Speaking* Online Implementation

Navigating the different platforms used for instruction such as the Zoom media application and institutional Learning Management Systems (LMS) was easier for some and harder for many others who before the 2020 academic year may have had no experience with it. Questions from instructors arose concerning student privacy, internet connectivity, server crashing issues, sudden institutional policy changes, and schedule changes, all the while aiming to satisfy both students and administration in what was for most, a remote teaching climate.

With the entire activity being implemented remotely, instructions were given using two primary devices. First, was the institution's online learning management system (LMS), *Manaba* -a site with functions that allow for the upload and download of files, the setting of time-limited assignments, posting of general announcements, and importantly for this particular activity, student grouping. With the *Projects* function of *Manaba*, it was possible to divide the class members into three evenly numbered groups, A, B, and C. It was then possible to assign different readings to each individual group. At the beginning of the semester, these five readings for each separate group were uploaded to the *Course News*. Students were also instructed to submit answers to comprehension questions, which accompanied each article as well as ten words chosen by the student to be used when giving story explanations. The submission deadlines were set to correspond to the beginning of a particular week's class start time in the *Assignments* category of *Manaba*. Students were able to make these submissions any time from the beginning of the semester until the deadline time.

The first of six Zoom sessions was designated for the explanation of the steps and reasons for the activity. With the use of the "screen share" function on Zoom, an article was shared with the students, read through and annotated for words that could possibly be used as *10 Helpful Words* selections. Afterwards, a diagram representing the 3 members of one group A, B, and C was illustrated and the interdependent nature of the required explanations and notetaking was explained.

The 3-Way Speaking activity was conducted every other week on Zoom. Students joined the meetings having already submitted their *10 Helpful Words* and reading comprehension answers to *Manaba*. After

taking role, breakout rooms were made so that ideally one A, B, and C member group could be arranged. Once breakout rooms were set, students were asked to join one and then begin to review their respective article and *10 Helpful Words*, while at the same time the instructor relocated students in order to create breakout rooms with an A, B, and a C in each room. Inevitably, a student or two would be absent and a breakout room would have two like group members, two As for example. In this case, students were requested to share their designated time explaining their reading. Once the breakout rooms were decided, all students were brought back to the main room and instructed to view their chat window, where a designated speaking times of six minutes were written for A, B, and, C, 9 : 30-36, 9 : 36-42, and 9 : 42-48 for example. Once speaking times were set, students were directed back to their breakout rooms to begin explaining their stories to other group members. They were also instructed to repeat their explanation if finished before the six minute time limit. This was to ensure students spoke for an entire 6 minutes. Partners were required to take notes as they listened. The teacher visited each breakout room in rotation offering praise and advice.

5. Results

Students' perception of reading difficulty

Correct implementation of *3-Way Speaking* requires the initial readings to be at a level where students can understand them with a moderately low amount of dictionary use. This was verified in Table 1, where nearly 95 % of the students either strongly agreed or agreed that their reading was 'easy'. This is also supported by the 35 (61%) students who responded they had no difficulty in selecting ten pertinent words from the text.

Table 1. Student's perception of *3-Way Speaking* reading difficulty

Questionnaire item	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. My article was easy to read. (n=57)	27	27	3	0
2. I could understand my article and choose <i>10 Helpful words</i> . (n=57)	35	22	0	0

Students' perception of own speaking ability

One indicator of whether self-efficacy has taken hold in a learner is to answer whether they feel they have improved because of one's own efforts. The items in (Table 2) indicate that students' efforts to correctly perform the *3-Way Speaking* tasks over two semesters did have an effect on their perceived

Table 2. Student's perception of own speaking ability

Questionnaire item	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
3. I was able to explain my reading to my partner so that they understood (n=57)	12	39	6	0
4. I came to understand my own English speaking proficiency and aim to improve (n=57)	13	29	15	0
5. My English speaking ability improved from the beginning of the academic year (n=57)	14	40	3	0

speaking proficiency. Nearly 25 % of the students strongly agreed that they felt their speaking abilities improved, and a full 70 % offered agreed responses. Schunk and DiBenedetto (2016) consider this self-monitoring of comprehension and ability to be a sign of self-efficacy. Figures were only slightly lower for perceived ability to offer adequate explanations to partners by the end of the academic year.

To further understand how students felt about *3-Way Speaking* and its self-efficacy specific objectives, a free comment section was provided. Students were asked to write freely about the *3-Way Speaking* activity and had no prompting from the teacher. The key themes which reflect positive self-efficacious attitudes are labeled in (Table 3) by frequency. At some point in their writing, nearly 44% of the students mentioned improvement in their English, infrequently mentioning reading or speaking, though 11 % did specifically mention feeling more confident in speaking. This is important because it demonstrates students' self-recognition of improvement. 21 % of students enjoyed the activity which also suggests they were in a relaxed emotional state during the activity. A sizeable number of students also mentioned the desire to improve as well as the articles being interesting and easily readable. This interest may be related to the fact the articles were, as the textbook titles suggest, true stories.

Though low in frequency, other pertinent statements which reflected a positive self-efficacious attitude in a few students were:

1. "I felt a sense of accomplishment"
2. "I felt happy when the teacher told me, 'good'.
3. "I was glad when my partners understood me"

Table 3. Students' attitudes on *3-Way Speaking* (ranked by frequency)

Frequency	Comment Category
25 (44%)	recognized English improved
12 (21%)	enjoyed <i>3-Way Speaking</i>
11 (19%)	want to improve
11 (19%)	readings were interesting
9 (16%)	readings were readily understandable
7 (12%)	good to work with others
6 (11%)	became more confident at speaking
2	felt a sense of accomplishment
2	was happy to be understood
1	was happy to be praised by teacher
1	I like this class 'menu'

6. Discussion and Limitations

The author was encouraged by the results of the study. Many students expressed perceiving an improvement in English ability while enjoying the challenge of speaking with partners. However, it was observed that students sometimes struggled with pronunciation. An attempt to remedy this during the second semester was employed. Instead of immediately creating breakout rooms for triad groups, only three rooms were created and the respective articles were read to each A, B, and C group. Vocabulary which might cause students trouble were repeated with clear syllable separation giving them a model for pronunciation. Addedly, putting voice to the story seemed to increase the amount of speaking afterwards.

The fact that all classes were conducted online made it impossible to prevent students from sometimes reading their article directly or finishing before the entire allotted six minutes had expired. Conversely, it was infrequently observed that many students consciously tried not to use the article during their explanations, instead trying harder to practice the activity as it was intended, using only *Ten Helpful Words*.

7. Conclusion

Despite the challenges of modifying an activity intended for a physical classroom to an online learning environment, it was possible to foster self-efficacious attitudes towards speaking among first-year students with the *3-Way Speaking* information exchange activity. When implemented with reading material well within students' grasp, making use of group work for vicarious experiences and task specific encouragement from the teacher, it is possible to help beginning level Japanese university students to feel more positive about their English abilities.

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