

Development of EFL Speaking Performance in the Japanese

Context

—日本における EFL スピーキングパフォーマンスの発達—

CHRISTOPHER Adam*

Abstract

Japanese EFL learners face challenges in speaking fluent and accurate English due to various cognitive, linguistic and affective factors. This paper explores the factors affecting EFL speaking skills as well as speaking performance with a review of literature. Based on this review, the paper argues that the quality of speaking instruction needs to be mainly focused on through improving the teaching techniques with creating links between teacher-guided learning and learners-initiated activities outside class. Finally, the paper concludes with insights into the teaching and learning of EFL speaking skills in the Japanese context.

Keywords : EFL, Speaking, Performance, Affective factors

1. Introduction

In Japan, learning outcomes have been surprisingly poor, especially in terms of speaking skills, despite a relatively long history of English education. Although the overall failure of English education in Japan has been reported and addressed, several researchers have agreed that it is most difficult for Japanese learners to acquire speaking abilities (Ellis, 1991; Farooq, 2005; Roger, 2008; Takanashi, 2004). For instance, Ellis (1991) pointed out that, as English speakers, Japanese high school and college graduates are incompetent especially in terms of sociolinguistic competence. Farooq (2005) argued that in real-world situations, and even at a survival level, Japanese EFL learners have serious difficulties communicating with English native speakers. Scores on the newly developed TOEFL iBT, which was designed to provide speaking evaluation, also suggested that

Japanese learners experience fundamental English oral communication problems (ETS, 2009). Hidasi (2004) suggested possible causes that could have a detrimental effect on the learning of foreign languages. This included a lack of real-world intercultural communicative competence (ICC) exposure and differences in Japanese ways of thinking that play a major role in communication behavior. Ellis (1991) examined the inability of Japanese learners to gain sociolinguistic competence in English and how certain features identified in Japanese communication styles by researchers can affect their spoken English. In comparison with those of native English speakers, they identified the general features of these types. These included becoming less vocal and more likely in intercultural encounters to use silence and back-channeling devices. This means that there may be strong cultural factors that affect the English-

speaking abilities of native Japanese English speakers, and many of these factors are correlated with affective variables such as the learning of foreign language, self-confidence, anxiety, and motivation. To improve their overall communicative competence, it may be important to understand the mechanism by which these different communication types work and improve the attitudes of learners towards IC. The degree to which subjects like foreign languages are intercultural, however, depends on the orientation of the curriculum (Davies & Read, 2005). In order to improve their critical understanding of the cultural dimensions of the target language and cultural representations, foreign language teaching should include exposing students to a variety of texts and representations of foreign culture (Byram & Feng, 2004; Ware & Kramsch, 2005). Researchers argued, however, that experiential learning about the target culture is more productive than learning confined to schools (Byram & Feng, 2004).

Fluency, which is the main aim of teaching speaking skills is the first element of speaking success. Fluency is the capacity of the learner to talk in a comprehensible manner. Hedge (2000) defined fluency as the ability to link words and phrases, clearly pronounce sounds, and to respond consistently using the right stress and pitch. Accuracy is the second element of speaking efficiency. Teachers must, therefore, work on improving their teaching techniques with creating links between teacher-guided learning and learners-initiated activities outside class in order to achieve a target competence in a realistic period.

During English interactions, learners need to pay careful attention to the consistency and completeness of the linguistic form, such as concentrating on grammatical structure, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Mazouzi, 2013). In order to correctly use grammatical structures, learners need produce the right length and complexity, and well-structured phrases, according to Thornbury (2005). As for vocabulary, accuracy means choosing the right words in the correct way. In different contexts, learners can apply similar terms and expressions that do not mean similar things. Learners should also be able to properly use terms and phrases. Thornbury (2005) argued that the least skill that students usually pay attention to is pronunciation. Speaking English correctly needs mastering phonological rules and knowing the various sounds and their pronunciation. Learners need to grasp various types of stress, tones, and pitch. All these variables combined help students to naturally and efficiently speak English.

2. English speaking challenges

In the EFL speaking classroom, there are some issues with speaking performance that students can experience. Suppression, lack of cultural awareness, lack of involvement, and use of the native language are these (Tuan & Mai, 2015). First challenge students face in class is suppression. They are often suppressed when they try to say something in the classroom. They fear to make mistakes and fear criticism. Littlewood (2007) stated that language classes can also cause students' restraint and anxiety. The second challenge is that the learner does not know what to do when there is no opportunity for them to express themselves. Learners sometimes

have little or nothing to do. Probably because the instructor chose a topic that didn't suit his learners. This was also supported by Baker and Westrup (2003), because when students speak in the foreign languages, students can't express their opinions, what to say or what vocabulary to use. He said that when questioned, it was very hard for learners to respond and properly use grammar. The third challenge with the speaking class is that there is a very poor active participation. Some students dominate the entire speaking class, while others speak little or nothing at all. Another problem with their English-speaking ability is the interference of their native language. Students use L1 in a speaking class when learners share the same native language (Tuan & Mai, 2015). There are several reasons why learners use their native language in English speaking classes. The first reason is that when teachers ask learners to talk about topics they do not have enough background information of, they try to use their native language. The second reason is that for learners, the use of the native language is natural. Learners would naturally try to use the first language to illustrate points to their peers. The final reason is the fact that when the teacher uses the native language of the learner on a regular basis, the learner feels more comfortable to use it accordingly.

Language difficulties faced by students at the University of Hong Kong were explored by Evans and Green (2007). The findings of this research indicated the problems of student's performance during academic speeches including syntax, fluency, and pronunciation, and academic writing, such as style, syntax, and coherence. When teachers help students overcome the difficulties

of learning speaking skills, factors that affect their speaking performance need to be identified such as performance environment, emotional factors, listening skills, and input during speaking tasks that affect the speaking performance of learners (Tuan & Mai, 2015). Performance is a product of circumstances that affect speaking performance such as time pressure, level of preparation, quality, and amount of support/scaffolding available. The second variable is linked to emotions. The emotional factor for the learner is one of the primary factors in learning a language. Many emotional variables were correlated with second-language acquisition, according to Krashen (1982), with three key forms examined by many researchers: motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. Based on the level of lessons, tasks, and the type of errors students make, teachers need to provide the appropriate feedback on speaking problems detected in the conversation in a way that doesn't hurt students' feelings. This argument was endorsed by Baker and Westrup (2003), arguing that if learners were continually corrected, they would be discouraged and afraid to speak. Thus, teachers should always correct errors of learners positively with more guidance and support so that they can take charge of their learning on their own outside class.

According to Mahripah (2014), many linguistic elements of the language, such as phonology, syntax, lexical and semantics, as well as psychological factors such as motivation and personality, influence the speaking performance of EFL learners. For EFL learners, phonology is a challenging part of language learning. English is not considered as a phonetic language. This is because pronunciation of English words is not

always identical to their spellings. Words with similar spellings are sometimes pronounced differently because of their associated discourse.

For non-native English speakers, this can create a lot of difficulties and can be frustrating when speaking English. Native speakers speak the language fluently and naturally say what they want. They may make certain errors that are syntactically incorrect, but these errors do not alter the meaning of the phrases they wish to convey, which makes it easy for listeners to understand them. However, non-native speakers' mistakes alter the meaning of the messages they want to express and cause problems (Mahripah, 2014). Motivation affects language learning. An integrated and friendly view of language learners makes learners more sensitive to the spoken language features of the language, and more sensitive to pronunciation and language accents, according to Merisuo-Strom (2007).

Communication skills alone are not enough for learners to develop their ability to communicate. The goal of speaking cannot be attained by the learner without a positive attitude towards speaking performance. Personality constructs such as anxiety, caution, and risk-taking are correlated with fear of speaking English. Learning a language can be distressing, and intense anxiety can contribute to the feeling of discouragement and disappointment of learners (Dogar2011).

Anxiety refers to both physical and emotional responses to situations, people, or expectations that arouse fear in a person (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Anxiety is a cognitive phenomenon concerned with future events where there is

uncertainty about the outcome, the future being is thought of in a negative way, and this is accompanied by feelings of fear. Horwitz and Cope (1986) introduced situational anxiety and its measurement scale to second and foreign language anxiety research.

The situational anxiety refers to foreign language anxiety, which is defined as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p. 28). Situational anxiety is distinguished from trait anxiety, which refers to individual's anxiety arousal in a variety of situations due to his/her personality traits. Anxiety can be either debilitating or facilitative. Debilitating anxiety is a kind of anxiety which is viewed as a negative factor or something to be avoided at all costs, like a feeling of test anxiety before exam (Brown et al., 2011). For example, Ueda, et al. (2004) adopted Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and investigated language anxiety of Japanese university students. They identified three factors and named them "avoidance of English class", "English class anxiety", and "speech anxiety" respectively. Facilitative anxiety kind of anxiety that is regarded as a positive element to promote language learning, such as tensions before public speech (Brown et al., 2011). Anxiety adversely affects the oral performance of English-speaking persons, according to Woodrow (2006). With the different skills of language learners, speaking anxiety can be related to the EFL classroom.

When learners in the same EFL class are divided into two levels: advanced and beginners,

advanced level students overshadow slow and low-level students. Usually, beginner learners do not want to talk in public, resulting in silence throughout activities in the class. Suppression is the fear that keeps people from talking or doing what they wish to do. Furthermore, low self-esteem EFL learners tend to avoid taking the risk of making errors in their speaking activities, which impedes their speaking skills development (Mahripah, 2014).

3. Conclusion

This paper reviewed several factors influencing speaking production of students. In developing the speaking abilities of learners, the elements mentioned in this paper play an important role. In EFL speaking classes, these variables cause learners to lose confidence. The findings of this paper indicate that learners with low self-esteem, high levels of anxiety, and low level of motivation, while they have reasonable language skills, have severe difficulties with their speaking skills.

This paper suggests that students that are highly motivated and less nervous can speak English easily and efficiently. Students need, therefore, to provide a comfortable and welcoming community that helps them resolve oral performance difficulties. Teachers need to consider the needs of their students and feelings based on a study of the research literature, increase the confidence of learners and choose the best teaching approach for learners to continue to engage in speaking activities. Students need to feel rewarded for speaking English. With their students, teachers need to build friendly relationships, make them feel great enthusiasm for studying English in class as well as outside class. Teachers should use

multiple speaking authentic activities to help them speak and enable them to engage in more speaking activities to give learners more chances to speak English. Furthermore, educators need to know when and how to correct the errors of learners so that they don't become anxious of making more errors.

References

- Brown, J. (2011). *Age and anxiety and depressive symptoms: the effect on domains of quality of life*. Wiley Online Library.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/gps.2675>.
- Byram, M., & Feng, A. (2004). Culture and language learning: Teaching, research and scholarship. *Language Teaching*, 37(3), 149-68.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444804002289>.
- Davies, L., & Read, A. (2005). Globalising citizenship education? A critique of 'global education' and 'citizenship education'. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 53(1), 66-89.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2005.00284.x>
- Ellis, R. (1991). Communicative competence and the Japanese learner. *JALT Journal*, 13(2), 103-127.
- Evans, S., & Green, C. (2007). Why EAP Is Necessary: A Survey of Hong Kong Tertiary Students. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 6, 3-17.
- Farooq, M. U. (2005). A model for motivating Japanese EFL learners through real-life questioning strategies. *The Journal of Nagoya Gakugei University*, 1(1), 27-42.

- Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hidasi, J. (2004). *The impact of culture on second language acquisition*. Paper presented at the Comparative Pragmatics Association 2nd Conference, Tokyo.
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125-132.
- Littlewood, W. (2007). *Communicative Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Krashen, S. D. (1988). *Second Language Acquisition. And Second Language Learning*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Mahripah, S. (2014). Exploring. *Factors Affecting EFL Learners' Speaking Performance: from Theories into Practices*. . Proceedings of the 3rd UAD TEFL International Conference 2014.
- Mazouzi, S. (2013). *Analysis of Some Factors Affecting Learners' Oral Performance. A Case Study: 3rd Year Pupils of Menaa's Middle Schools*. M. A. Dissertation.
- Merisuo-Storm, T. (2007). Pupil's Attitudes towards Foreign-Language Learning and the Development of Literacy Skills in Bilingual Education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 23, 226-235.
- Roger, A. (2008). Teaching the speaking skill to Japanese students part 1: Construct & practice. *The Journal of Kanda University of International Studies*, 20(1), 1-26.
- Takanashi, Y. (2004). TEFL and communication styles in Japanese culture. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 17(1), 1-14.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07908310408666678>.
- Thornbury, S. (2005). *How to Teach Speaking*. Harmer, J. (Ed). London: Longman.
- Tuan, N. H., & Mai, T. N. (2015). Factors Affecting Students' Speaking Performance at LE Thanh Hien High School. *Asian Journal of Educational Research*, 3(2), 8-23.
- Ueda, N. O. (2004). *The development of the scales of individual differences based on cognitive style, aptitude, motivation, and learning strategy*. Nagoya, Japan. : Japan Association of College English Teachers.
- Urrutia León, W., & Vega Cely, E. (2010). Encouraging Teenagers to Improve Speaking Skills through Games in a Colombian Public School, *PROFILE*, 12(1), 11-31. Bogotá, Colombia.
- Ware, P. D., & Kramsch, C. (2005). Toward an intercultural stance: Teaching German and English through telecollaboration. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89(2), 190-205.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2005.00274.x>
- Woodrow, L. (2006). Anxiety and Speaking English as a Second Language. *RELJ Journal*, 37(3), 308-328.