

# Enhancing Japanese University Students' English Engagement and Speaking Proficiency Using Smartphones

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## Introduction

In Japan, university entrance tests, which rely on testing receptive skills, still dictate the focus of English education in secondary schools, leaving students ill prepared for the communicative requirements of university classrooms. The chance to practice using English with native speakers of English (NSEs) is also limited and many students do not see the purpose of studying English (Kikuchi, 2013) except for passing the unit so they can graduate.

In this paper I outline a series of speaking activities I introduced in speaking classes for which students use their smartphones, as an innovative way of practicing English. After a review of pertinent literature, the innovation and class practices are presented, followed by a discussion and analysis of the results, culminating in suggested pedagogical implications.

## Literature review

### Use of smartphones in language classes

Much research on the use of smartphones to enhance learning such as evaluation of smartphone applications (Kim & Kwon, 2012), the usefulness of particular applications (Sung & Poole, 2017), and Japanese students' attitudes to smartphone use for language learning (White & Mills, 2014) has been undertaken. The increasing ubiquity of smartphones means most students and teachers have access to smartphones, and although using their smartphones to speak in English might be seen as a new and unique activity, using technology that students are familiar with reduces anxiety (Gobel & Kano, 2014) and increases student engagement while supporting cooperative learning (Nielsen & Webb, 2015). The pedagogical use of smartphones was introduced

to address the limited amount of class time and, the limited opportunities to interact with native speakers of English (NSEs); to maximize the efficacy of homework assignments; to reduce the students' levels of anxiety; and to increase students' confidence and motivation using English.

### Limited class time and opportunity to use English

Using the prescribed textbook to help students transition from a focus on receptive skills to activating their accumulated English knowledge to interactively participate in an English only environment, created a situation where teachers and many students were frustrated with the simplistic product that emerged at the end of the subject. Many students were unable to interact for longer than two minutes; their conversations were more like an interview than natural conversation and they often used Japanese (L1). The final test is a paired test format that hopefully reflects realistic student-student interaction. Although paired speaking tasks are now commonly used in both pedagogic and assessment contexts (Nitta & Nakatsuhara, 2014) because they elicit a wide range of interactional skills (Galaczi, 2014), paired speaking tests are uncommon, so they are challenging for students. Paired tests are also more likely to induce positive washback with teaching and classroom and homework activities centered on pair and group activities (Egyud & Glover, 2001), which result in increased practice time. However, just giving students more time to practice speaking may not lead to proficiency gains (Nakatani, 2005) as was evident in our classrooms. Limited opportunities to interact with NSEs outside of class, and class sizes of 30 reduce students' ability to interact with the English teacher.

### Student confidence, anxiety, and motivation

Many students lack confidence in their English abilities, because of past experiences of failure, and they are very apprehensive about their abilities to participate in class and to perform adequately on the final test. Besides experiences of failure, other common demotivating factors include teachers, class characteristics, environment, materials, and lack of goals (Kikuchi, 2013).

To address these problems and to create an environment conducive to second language acquisition, a task was created that encouraged social relationships within the class (Watanabe & Swain, 2007) and students' involvement and self-confidence by using appropriate scaffolding (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). Appropriate scaffolding included classroom activities incorporating interactional and communication strategies, so students could become more proficient (Nakatani, 2010), and a variety of feedback and assessment measures and activities. Self-assessment and correction activities were used to motivate students, so they could clearly see their progress (Harris, 1997), and to help students *notice* (Schmidt, 2001) gaps in their language. Although there may be some resistance from students because they fear they may adopt the mistakes of their partners, the feedback may not be appropriate, or they may worry that their skills are limited, or that they may appear arrogant (Barker, 2004; Hyland, 2004), guiding students to become resources for each other reduces the reliance on NSEs. It also helps learners experiment and test new forms of language, move beyond a dependence on formulaic language, and highlights the benefits of interaction and motivation to learn (Philp, Adams & Iwashita, 2014).

Task repetition is also important because it has been shown to help most learners develop greater language complexity, fluency, and accuracy (Goh & Burns, 2012), and repetition can be instrumental in reducing the possibility of learned helplessness, particularly with science and engineering students (Johnson, 2013).

## Methodology

### Curriculum

The innovation described in this paper was conducted at Ehime University in 2018. All first-year students (around 1800) are required to take General English (taught as separate skills) under the quarter system (15 classes) with English 1-Speaking taught in the first quarter. Classes of around 30 students are taught for

90 minutes twice a week. The goals of the speaking curriculum are for students to communicate their ideas clearly and concisely in English and to actively participate in conversations. The final test is a five-minute paired speaking test.

### Homework assignments

Under the quarter system, students have an average of three days to complete homework assignments, so the incidences of incomplete homework and student complaints about workload versus student life balance are high. As a result, teachers began giving homework assignments that involved receptive skills (e.g., vocabulary lists), which may not be the most effective use of out-of-class time to attain the goals of the class.

### Participants

The 152 participants in this study (97 (64%) males and 55 (36%) females) were in five of my speaking classes from the Faculties of Agriculture, Law and Letters, Science, Mechanical Engineering, and Collaborative Regional Innovation. The majority of students (96%) were 18 or 19 years old and had at least six years of English classes in secondary school and are mostly classified as Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR) A1 or A2 (Council of Europe, 2001).

### Procedure

All students participating in this project of five paired speaking activities carried out as a homework assignment, owned a smartphone and gave their informed consent to take part in this research.

Pairs of students contacted each other using their smartphones and spoke in English about a particular topic. After the call finished, they wrote notes about the conversation including the conversation itself (who said what), their feelings about the conversation, and anything they noticed they did not know or learned from their partner. In the next class, the same pair of students compared notes, asked the teacher or other students for clarification on any points, made any revisions, and practiced the conversation, again referring to their notes. Then pairs of students performed for another pair, a group, or in front of the class. This task was repeated five times with a different partner each time. This repetition enabled different conversational structures (e.g., greetings, turn-taking, giving opinions), linguistic features, performances and feedback, and assessment to

become more complex as students became used to doing the task and became more confident about performing and providing feedback. To maximize the potential for language learning, class activities linked to the telephone task were designed and implemented. These activities included goal setting, reflecting on how to cooperate with others effectively, how to perform assessments and deliver feedback, and fluency exercises.

This activity provided students with a mix of qualitative and quantitative assessment, carried out by themselves, peers, and the teacher. For each of the telephone tasks, students were asked to reflect and write down their comments (Student Reflections) based on how well they thought they had carried out the task (preparedness, attitude, active listening, helping partner, usefulness of written notes after the call) or any linguistic features they had learned. In this innovation, accuracy was only attended to if lack of accuracy impeded communication. This action was deliberate because fear of making mistakes inhibits Japanese students from communicating (Carless, 2012). For some of the calls, after watching a pair perform, qualitative feedback in the form of oral comments was given by the teacher or other pairs, and for other calls it was quantitative, using a checklist. This clear feedback provided students with what was done well and what areas needed improvement.

## Results

To determine if the intervention was successful, data from whole class surveys, student reflections after each

task, a research journal kept by the teacher, and semi-structured interviews with students were collected.

### Whole-class survey

All 152 students taking the speaking classes were surveyed for their opinions of the telephone activity. The questionnaire asked students to respond to a series of statements using a 4-level Likert scale and to provide comments, if desired. The results of the survey are shown in Table 1.

Although the internal reliability of the survey was low, making any inferences drawn from the data contentious, the data collated from other sources confirm the findings to some extent.

While almost 95% of all students said they were pleased with the progress made speaking to other classmates on the telephone and the activity helped them to improve their English (96%), and gave them confidence to speak English (95%), the enjoyment students got from cooperating with their peers to achieve the tasks was rated the most positively with an average of 3.34. The lowest average rating of any of the questions was about future smartphone use in English classes. This finding is a little surprising given the positive comments about smartphone use for this activity, but it is not entirely unexpected given prior research findings (Stockwell, 2008). Although the majority (97%) of students thought the telephone activity was a good way to improve their speaking skills, a high percentage (93%) thought that they could have improved their speaking skills by doing other activities.

Table 1. Frequency of responses to telephone activity questionnaire ( $N=152$ )

Items	4	3	2	1	M	SD
1. Pleased with progress made speaking to other classmates on the telephone	38 (25%)	69 (45.4%)	37 (24.3%)	8 (5.3%)	2.91	0.19
2. Telephoning other classmates helped to improve my English	31 (20.4%)	71 (46.7%)	44 (28.9%)	6 (3.9%)	2.84	0.06
3. Could have improved speaking skill by doing other activities	30 (19.7%)	64 (42.1%)	47 (30.9%)	11(7.2%)	2.75	0.21
4. Enjoyed cooperating with other students to achieve speaking tasks	73 (48%)	62 (40.8%)	12 (7.9%)	5 (3.3%)	3.34	0.21
5. Telephone activity has given me confidence to speak English	23 (15.1%)	78 (51.3%)	43 (28.3%)	8 (5.3%)	2.77	0.16
6. Telephone activity is a good way to improve students' speaking skill	43 (28.3%)	73 (48%)	32 (21%)	4 (2.6%)	3.02	0.11
7. Interested in using smartphone in other ways in English class	25 (16.4%)	55 (36.2%)	57 (37.5%)	15 (9.9%)	2.59	0.09

Notes: 4=Agree, 3=Quite agree, 2=Agree a little, 1=Disagree; M=mean, SD=standard deviation

### Student reflections

Students made notes on their telephone activity sheets, or on their comment cards, which provided student feedback on activities undertaken in the course. Comments that showed individual progress and students' awareness of using English as a communicative tool such as *I want to use as many kinds of reaction words in order to talk more effectively and actively next time, I feel I'm talking more smoothly, I can talk about my ideas, I could deepen the topic by using various question words, It felt good to try hard and I was really helped by my partner* confirmed the survey results. This assignment also helped students find new friends, common hobbies, learn about the city they had just moved to, and enjoy university life more.

### Research Journal

To assess the effectiveness of each stage of the intervention, I kept a journal to more deeply understand how and why students might be affected by the intervention for future improvement. These entries covered outside influences such as university events, special events (World Cup soccer games being broadcast at 2:00 am), and classroom specific influences, such as class time (first period on Monday morning) and student proficiency.

### Semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interviews were based on the survey results. Ten students volunteered to be interviewed and could choose the language they were most comfortable communicating in. A Japanese English teacher and I transcribed the interviews. The interview data echoed the majority of students' written comments that telephoning classmates in English was a unique activity, but it was also challenging because it was difficult to talk and write notes at the same time and sometimes difficult to remember what was said in the call. Students also said it was useful to 'perform' in class or watch other students because they felt a close connection to their classmates and could learn from them, and that targeted feedback from the teacher and peers throughout the process helped to lessen their stress and anxiety. When asked to elaborate on activities students could do instead of telephone calls to improve their speaking skills, students said more practice or individual homework assignments. A surprising finding was that most students said they would rather talk to someone who had the same level of English proficiency rather

than more- or less-proficient speakers.

## Discussion

The following themes emerged from the data.

### Individual progress

Although the final test is an evaluation of what students produce on the day and may not reflect everything they know or have learned (Fulcher, 2010), on-going assessment in class through feedback from peers and the teacher, and self-assessment enhances metacognitive awareness of their learning progress (Hale, 2015). Having notes about the conversation helped students to review specific linguistic forms and to review with their partner in class; they also served as a prompt to use in class if or when they performed. Student-generated conversations also provided the teacher with a supply of authentic conversations that represented "things that matter to them in their lifeworlds" (Chappell, 2014, p.6) and provided evidence of current student knowledge, common difficulties, or gaps in their knowledge.

### English as a communicative tool

Students commented that they were finally using English to communicate with other people compared with English they studied in high school. Reviewing and learning communicative structures in class and then having a chance to practice them with someone else helped them to understand how to use the language effectively. Using smartphones meant students could not rely on gestures to signal their confusion or to help them explain something when they lacked the appropriate vocabulary, which directly led to investigating clarification or other strategies to maintain the conversation. While the use of some strategies, such as message abandonment or the use of L1, may not be effective in the long term, judicious use of the L1 can help learners to extend their interaction (Philp, Adams & Iwashita, 2014) and may make talking about their language production more effective, which can lead to proficiency gains (Swain, 2005).

### Making friends

Employing an interactive out-of-class assignment challenged students to communicate with people they did not know well, and it helped contribute to an energized class atmosphere.

### Peer-interaction

Although some students worried about their English proficiency and whether they could assist more-proficient peers, all students discovered that they could help each other and felt they had improved their English, even though their partner was not a NSE. This result supports previous research findings on peer interaction (Baker, Cundick, Evans, Henrichsen & Dewey, 2012). Becoming involved in peer-assessment not only made students aware of the assessment requirements but also challenged them to reevaluate their previously held beliefs that learning English is difficult.

### Motivated by the challenge

Overall, students were motivated to complete each task because it could increase their opportunity for getting a higher score on the final test. The various stages of the telephone activity (calling, writing, assessing, practicing, performing) helped motivate students with different levels of English proficiency in different ways (Sugita & Takeuchi, 2010), with less-proficient students being motivated by having many opportunities for success and getting regular feedback on areas they needed to improve, whereas more-proficient speakers were motivated by the public display of their skills.

### Use of smartphones

Although Stockwell (2008) suggested students may regard their smartphones as their 'private space', which should be clearly separated from their 'studying space', in this study, students thought that using their smartphones was a convenient way to practice speaking English outside of class because they could arrange a flexible and convenient time to talk, and these findings echo more recent research that found that the lines between spaces are becoming blurred because students use their phones for school, leisure, work, and communication (Viberg & Grönlund, 2013).

### Implications and future pedagogical directions

Students overwhelmingly (96%) thought that taking part in the telephone activity was helpful in improving their speaking ability, and all were able to pass the final paired speaking test. Although it is difficult to measure how much this activity helps students' speaking and listening improvement, more time on task, a deeper

engagement with the language and utilizing and valuing each other as learning resources should lead to improved language proficiency.

In future, students' self-reported language gains could be supplemented with an analysis of their written telephone conversations, or calls could be recorded and analyzed to determine effective strategy use and short-term language gains. Recording calls could also free students from having to write while talking.

As students also felt that they could have improved their speaking skill by doing other activities instead of the telephone task, future research could entail using a control group that only engages in individual preparation of conversations outside of class, or a group that does different types of English study, which may highlight what type of activity helps students improve their English proficiency. Redesigning the questionnaire to overcome reliability issues is also important.

Understanding if this activity leads to sustained confidence using English or increased students' extramural study after class is the next phase of this research.

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