Extra-curricular activities to improve speaking competence for English learners of all levels

Rian DAVIS

This paper discusses the results of action research conducted on freshman university students aged 18-19 during the 2018 fall semester and explains the rationale for speaking activities held outside the classroom in any language instructional setting regardless of level. The paper also discusses the results from surveys conducted in classes where students have used outside activities to enhance target language proficiency.

One of the most common questions I hear as an English as a foreign language instructor is, "Teacher, how can I study English?" After asking several more questions of the students, I suspected that what they *really* want to know is: "How can I speak and listen to English better?" Part of the reason for my assumption is since they have already had six years formal instruction of English while surviving many brutal high stakes tests, they do not want me to teach them how to memorize verbs better or some magical grammar rule, which will unlock all doors of confusion. Instead, they say the roots of their dissatisfaction is that they "still cannot speak very well". This paper addresses these concerns head on by offering new strategies for students that have, based on surveys and interviews over the years, empowered students with at least one tool to answer their quest to speak better despite spending so much time on their formal language education.

OVERVIEW

In section one, I discuss the literature related to chat groups and outline the challenge this activity is meant to address. In section two, I discuss how language instructors can carry out chat groups as well as how to measure student progress. Furthermore, an important purpose of this section is to explain the issues I faced as well as to discuss some of the issues I had addressed. In section three, I briefly discuss the results of the survey given to the students and discuss the research questions. In section four, I offer concluding remarks.

Scope of the problem

Based on surveys of my students, few of them have had anywhere near the amount of speaking production that they felt they needed in order to communicate effectively with an international visitor. Furthermore, very few students report having sufficient confidence in their speaking ability in terms of engaging in class discussions and responding during interviews, and even among those that do have sufficient confidence, many report the desire for additional practice. In addition, it has long been known that in order to gain fluency, if not accuracy, an L2 learner must practice the language.

According to Gardner's (2006) model, the aggregate amount of time speaking a language affects factors such as motivation, rate of production, and confidence. Indeed, one of the goals of communicative language teaching (CLT) is to reduce teacher talk and enhance meaningful student talk as much as possible (Richards, 2006). Two relatively sound principles from neuropsychology help reinforce the importance of practical usage of a target language: Hebb's Rule and the recent discovery of the principle of neuroplasticity. Hebb's Rule is the source for the famous phrase "neurons that fire together, wire together", and his principle could be roughly summed up as "use it or lose it" (Hebb, 1949). Neuroplasticity, based on the numerous studies of brain scans and in part on aphasia recoveries, indicate that the brain is a dynamic complex system that responds to input, and neuro "real estate" is in high demand and space that is not used is often replaced with something else.

Student resistance to speaking English: Outlining the challenge

According to survey results collected by Murphey and Sasaki (1998), two of the main reasons there is reluctance to use English for Japanese learners is that using Japanese is more comfortable and natural and that it is faster for relaying the information in class. Likewise, Japanese university students often describe a similar desire for more speaking practice in English in order to help their fluency. Affective factors are also a barrier to speaking in English, and anxiety has a particularly strong impact on Japanese students compared with other countries (Woodrow, 2006), with peer pressure being one of the most formidable barriers (Tarone & Swain, 1995).

Case for Outside Speaking Assignments

Researchers such as Ellis (2005) mention the benefits of "input outside the classroom", but mainly in the context of extensive reading. Cheng (2015) notes how "out-of-class English learning" is beneficial for some students.

Furthermore, Gaines (2015) notes how English use outside the classroom in an ESL/IEP setting can improve the confidence of language learners, especially among lower level students. In order to counter resistance to speaking in English amongst students and provide meaningful speaking time for students, it is useful to assign speaking assignments outside the classroom. Henceforth, I shall refer to these activities as "outside speaking assignments". According to my anonymous surveys in class and informal conversations with students, it is very hard for the students themselves to arrange regular study sessions where they speak only in English without instructor intervention (e.g., assigned groups with the purpose of speaking). The reasons for this are unclear, but based on the comments, many students share a cultural stigma of speaking to their fellow classmates in English as noted in the introduction (e.g. "I am Japanese, and my classmate is Japanese too, so it's strange to suggest that we both speak in English."). Nonetheless, there is evidence for a strong desire for outside speaking assignments once it is carried out (Dörnyei, 2001).

Many students give reasons for their desire to speak outside of class. The vast majority of students that were surveyed, both formally and informally, said they were given very little time to speak during primary and secondary education. This is corroborated by studies conducted by Nishino (2012) and Nishimuro and Borg (2013) which noted that teachers lack the resources and competency to incorporate CLT-focused activities effectively. Furthermore, some students report spending a great deal of money in private conversation schools such as AEON and GEOS, while enrolled in university language classes to practice free speaking based on my survey results.

This is unnecessary. Non-native speakers of the target language are entirely capable of carrying out meaningful conversations where productive interactions are shared without native speaker intervention, and once students build a habit of speaking outside, the tasks become much easier, and students often report meeting for longer successive periods for their assignments.

What are Outside Speaking Assignments?

Outside speaking are defined as either one of two kinds of outside-the-classroom speaking assignments: 1) either free speaking with no specific topic assigned but an emphasis on general communicative skills or 2) with specific objective goals (often related to some topic discussed during the class). The purpose of the first kind is to foster general fluency and to emphasize general communicative strategies taught in the language classroom. The purpose of the second is to reinforce key concepts, vocabulary, or strategies emphasized in

class, often through content-based instruction. The activity outlined in this paper is related to the first kind of assignment.

Makeup of the classes studied

The data collected for this paper comes from the Intensive English course I have taught at Kwansei Gakuin University. The twenty-two students are university freshman, aged 18 or 19, and the class consists of 6 male and 16 female students. The students started with a low-intermediate range in terms of speaking and listening. The amount of contact hours was three, 90-minute classes for a total of 4.5 hours per week.

Outside Speaking Activities applicable to first-year university students?

Ideally, outside speaking activities could apply to students of any background or level. If, for instance, the students are absolute beginners, instructions for the task could be given in the student's native language and an outside speaking tasked assigned could focus on new language and vocabulary that complete beginners learn (e.g. a basic utterance such as "How are you?").

Goals of the study

In the course of carrying out the action research, the following research questions were probed:

RQ1: Does the chat group activity increase student self-confidence when speaking in English?

RQ2: Does the chat group activity improve their ability to speak in English?

These two questions will be pursued by analyzing the results of student surveys given to my first-year intensive English students. Originally, five questions were given to the students via SurveyMonkey, an online survey application. However, due to concerns of brevity, only two of the five questions will be discussed in this paper.

Method for assigning Outside Speaking Assignments to participants

When I carried out the outside speaking assignments, I assigned groups beforehand during the beginning of the semester. The groups can range in number from two to three students. In general, having more than three students causes problems for arranging times to meet with each other, with two being the simplest number and allows for maximum language production. The schedules are arranged by listing the students with different partners for each week.

Next, I distributed the schedule to the students, explaining that they are to meet each partner based on the number that the student is assigned (see Appendix 1). From experience, I found it is a good idea to check a few students to make sure that they understand what their task is. For example, ask a student, "Mike, who is your partner for week 3?" After a few repetitions, the students quickly understand.

After the schedule is distributed, it is useful to instruct the students on what to say and how to discuss various topics (see Appendixes 2 and 3). This is where the in-class training component is helpful. Depending on the topic of the class, various topics can be given to discuss or daily topics such as recent classes, homework, what students had for lunch, etc. Usually, a handout is given with a list of the conversation starters that had been practiced in class. These conversation starters are useful for students to talk about their daily lives. Furthermore, these language tasks greatly extend the students' competency in forming sentences, making questions and responding using full sentences.

Students should be given feedback on their hand-in sheet on what kinds of topics they are discussing. Writing notes such as "What do you mean?", "What else did you discuss?", or "How was that important to you?" often eliciting more detailed summaries on future work. These tasks can be given as the students' level permits.

Importance of emphasizing full sentences during language production

In my experience, students often answer questions with very brief responses. Unfortunately, this means that they are not practicing their subject agreement in clauses, nor are they practicing essential "connecting" words such as conjunctions (e.g. and, nor, but, etc.), subordinators (e.g. because, although, when, etc.) or transitions (e.g. furthermore, in addition, etc.). These "connecting" words are essential for forming complex thoughts and ideas during communication. In addition, they are essential for formal settings such as interviews, speeches and other presentations.

One way I encouraged students to focus on their sentence structure and pushed them to speak in full sentences was by having students record their conversations with each other. This is a fruitful method that allows the student to hear their actual language production, which can sometimes surprise them since they discover errors and other distractors such as Japanese interjections that they never knew they were making. Oftentimes, students cannot detect errors even if they can recognize the error once it is pointed out. Higher student awareness and recognition of personal errors is very important in avoiding future errors and avoiding L1 interference. With digital recorders and smart

phone apps, students can choose from a wide variety of options the tools that they can record their speech with. Therefore, nearly all students can have access to devices that can record their voices, be it theirs or their partner's.

Another method for ensuring that students give full answers to questions was to encourage them to speak full sentences in class by walking around the room during discussion and purposefully asking them to voice their answers more fully. In my experience, as time passes, students become aware of the requirement and gradually become less needful of prompting. However, unless prodding takes place, most students will fall back to bad habits. It is important to remind them that even though native speakers do not always give full answers to questions, by speaking full sentences they practice a variety of skills including verb conjugation, and clausal structures, as well as improve their overall competence in language production.

Do students perform roles outside of class with little teacher direction?

The short answer is yes. However, a technique is used to ensure that both students in a pair are participating fully. An optional hand-in sheet is distributed that allows students to report any other student who may not be fully cooperating (see Appendix 3). Nonetheless, among all the classes I have implemented the out-of-class learning activities, very few complaints from students who have carried out the outside speaking activity has been reported to me.

In fact, students occasionally carry out their chat group assignments while walking outside, and by chance this instructor saw a few students carrying out their tasks in a very active manner. The students were engaged in a vibrant, dynamic conversation—all in English.

On some assignment sheets, the students reported speaking for up to four hours, with about 20% of the students chatting longer than the required 30 minutes speaking time. The result is, if the student assignment sheets are to be taken at face value, the students increase their English-speaking time by up to six hours in a semester (for Intensive English students, who meet three times a week), or a nearly 200-hour increase in student speaking for a class of 24 students. This, in itself, is a compelling reason to carry out outside speaking assignments in some form.

Feedback on the Outside Speaking Activity

During the 2018 fall semester, I have asked for qualitive feedback in terms of informal surveys and comments. Students have, so far, written no negative comments about being assigned outside speaking activities. Furthermore, most

of the qualitative comments have been positive with some either saying it was one of the best activities in class or at least very helpful. Many students enjoyed the freedom to chat without a purpose, as this was a break from most speaking assignments. They took advantage of the freedom to talk about their own lives and personal interests. In addition, on the summary sheet, some students reported speaking for more than fifteen minutes longer than the required time (see Appendix 3 for the summary sheet). From reading some of the speaking summary assignments, I determined a small percentage of students may have run out of topics to discuss during the outside speaking assignments, and when asked, these students write on surveys that they still described the assignments as useful.

Assessing student comments taken from informal surveys, other feedback provided by the students is as follows:

- One of the things I enjoyed so much was talking with classmates outside of class.
- I really enjoyed the chance to speak to classmates during chat groups because it was so helpful to me.
- The chat group's assignment was so nice and fun. I could make many friends during conversations.
- I really liked the conversation group's assignment. I want to do it again more and more.
- Sometimes it was difficult to think of what to say next

Feedback on the challenges of speaking English inside the classroom

In regard to speaking inside the classroom and the challenges of speaking inside the classroom, many students have reported having difficulty speaking with others because they are nervous. Some students say it is sometimes hard to speak while being observed. Furthermore, students have mentioned that speaking English in a crowded or private place often makes them feel more comfortable because they do not have the pressure of their peers.

Toward a goal of life-long learning

My goal in carrying out the action research was to instill positive speaking habits in the students. This is consistent with the call from some scholars to promote lifelong learning practices and generic skills through higher education (de la Harpe, Radloff, & Wyber, 2000; Knapper, 2010). Ultimately, whatever path the language instructor decides to take, it is important to promote long-term speaking habits that strengthen language ability through constant

practice. It is much harder to find native speakers of the target language to practice with in a foreign language setting. However, helping students realize that by working with friends and colleagues who share similar goals via weekly speaking groups, it is possible to meet the challenge of finding ways to maintain language skills and even strengthen language ability. The seeds of these habits may be planted in class by using outside speaking activities of some sort based on course needs. By finding the time to meet and often by using technology such as Skype or Facetime when physical barriers become too great, numerous ways to continue speaking and practicing can be achieved.

STUDENT SURVEY

Overview of the Survey

An anonymous five question survey was delivered via SurveyMonkey to twenty-two students in an intensive English class during the 2018 fall semester at Kwansei Gakuin University. The students were advised of the purpose of the survey: to improve classroom activities, and hence the focus of the action research.

Results of the Survey

Of five questions given to 22 students, I discuss two of the survey results here:

> Q1: Did the chat group activity improve your confidence in speaking and listening in English?

Sixteen out of 22 students answered 'yes' to this question on the survey. The remaining students, six out of 22 students, answered 'a little' to this question (see Table 1).

> Q2: Did the chat group activity help improve your ability speaking and listening in English?

Sixteen out of 22 students answered 'yes' to this question. Four out of 22 students answered 'a little', and two out of 22 students answered 'so so'(see Table 2).
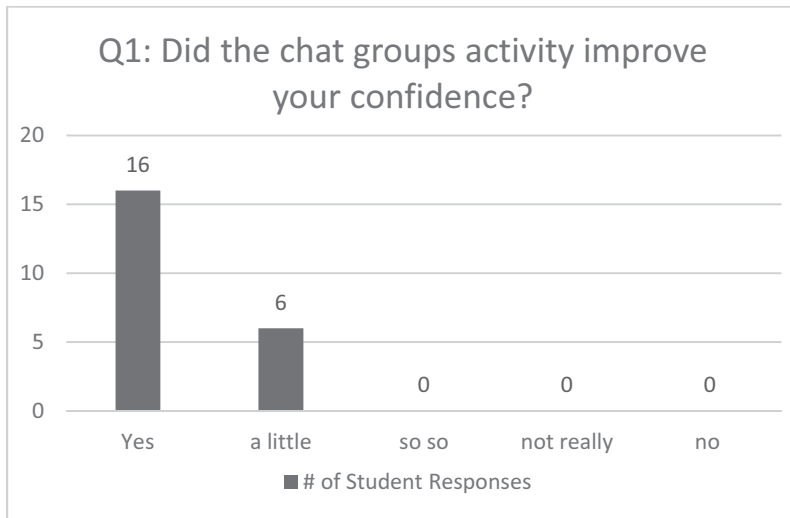
Table 1

Question 1 Responses

Q1: Did the chat groups activity improve your confidence?

Response	# of Student Responses
Yes	16
a little	6
so so	0
not really	0
no	0

Table 2

Question 1 Responses

Q2: Did the chat groups help your speaking and listening ability in English?

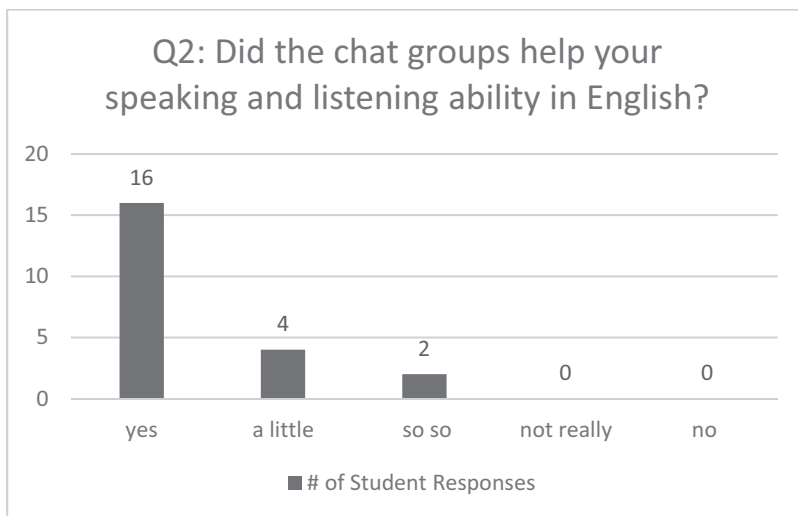| Response	# of Student Responses
yes	16
a little	4
so so	2
not really	0
no	0

Table 2: Question 2 Responses

Discussion of results

Because the vast majority of students 'yes' to both questions, both RQ1 and RQ2 are also answered affirmatively. 73% of students answered Q1 and the rest answered in the affirmative—albeit with less confidence. The same result was shown for Q2, although here 9% of students answered 'so so', which means no effect was noticed in their ability. Student comments were also similar to the results in the survey, with many saying they benefited from the activity very much. Thus, from the limited scope provided by this survey, it appears the outside speaking activities were beneficial to the students both in terms of improving speaking and listening confidence and ability for this class.

CONCLUSION

While many students desire extra speaking time, left to their own devices, often do not organize opportunities amongst their classmates for outside speaking practice. Giving outside class speaking assignments is an easy and valuable way for instructors to increase student speaking without taking up too much valuable in class time. Students consistently desire more chances to speak, and this type of assignment gives it to them. Furthermore, according to the survey results given at the end of class and students' comments during interviews, outside speaking can benefit a student's confidence, fluency and vocabulary building. By assigning outside speaking assignments, the instructor can fill a large void in her students' speaking regimen.

Limitations

Some shortcomings of this study are evident. First, the sample size of students is too small to generalize for all language learners, especially given that the age range was too narrow, and the level was too focused. Other research is needed for participants with a greater range of ages, ability and L1. Second, due to the limitation of having the participants answer their own perceptions, a more objective way of evaluation is necessary. This is difficult at the tertiary level due to privacy concerns, but some objective evaluation method of ability or confidence after the outside speaking activity is carried out by the instructor is a valuable Third, observations by the instructor of the outside speaking activity would be useful to see what actually happens rather than having language

learners report what happens. The language learners may not report important information such as the barriers faced, or topics covered. In sum, more research is needed to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of outside speaking activities.

References

De La Harpe, B., Radloff, A., & Wyber, J. (2000). Quality and generic (professional) skills. *Quality in Higher Education*, 6(3), 231-243. doi:10.1080/13538320020005972

Cheng, C-M. (2015). Perceptions of and experiences with college English majors' out-of-class English learning in Taiwan. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 6(4), 737-748. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0604.05

Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ellis, R. (2005). Principles of instructed language learning. *The Asian EFL Journal*, 7(3), 9-24.

Gaines, I. (2015). Increasing confidence and English use outside the ESL/IEP classroom for lower-level learners. *ORTESOL Journal*, 32, 56-67. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1152417.pdf

Gardner, R. C. (2006). The socio-educational model of second language acquisition: Aresearch paradigm. *EUROSLA Yearbook*, *6*, 237-260.

Hebb, D. O. (1949). *The organization of behavior: A neuropsychological theory*. New York: Wiley and Sons.

Knapper, C. (2010). Changing teaching practice: Barriers and strategies. In J. Christensen Hughes. and J. Mighty (Eds.), *Taking stock: Research on teaching and learning in higher education*. Toronto, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Murphey, T., & Sasaki, T. (1998). Japanese English teachers' increasing use of English. *The Language Teacher*, *22*(10), 22, 21-24 & 32.

Nishimuro, M., & Borg, S. (2013). Teacher cognition and grammar teaching in a Japanese high school. *JALT Journal*, 35(1), 29-50.

Nishino, T. (2011). *Komyunikatibu apurochi ni kansuru nihonjin koukou eigo koushi no shinhou to jissen* [Japanese high school teachers' beliefs and practices regarding communicative language teaching]. *JALT Journal*, 33(2), 131-156.

Richards, J. (2006). *Communicative language teaching today*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Tarone, E., & Swain, M. (1995). A sociolinguistic perspective on second language use in immersion classrooms. *Modern Language Journal*, *79*, 166-178.

Woodrow, L. (2006). Anxiety and speaking English as a second language. *RELC Journal: A Journal of Language Teaching and Research in Southeast Asia*, *37*, 308-328.

Appendix A. Schedule of Student Pairs

		week number			
Sample Student Schedule		8	9	10	11
1	Student 1	3	17	20	18
2	Student 2	10	13	19	21
3	Student 3	1	12	16	20
4	Student 4	22	18	17	22
5	Student 5	7	14	10	11
6	Student 6	8	21	11	15
7	Student 7	5	10	12	19
8	Student 8	6	20	22	17
9	Student 9	11	24	21	14
10	Student 10	2	7	5	12
11	Student 11	9	16	6	5
12	Student 12	20	3	7	10
13	Student 13	15	2	18	16
14	Student 14	21	5	15	9
15	Student 15	13	19	14	6
16	Student 16	18	11	3	13
17	Student 17	19	1	4	8
18	Student 18	16	4	13	1
19	Student 19	17	15	2	7
20	Student 20	12	8	1	3
	due date:	4-Jun	11-Jun	18-Jun	25-Jun

Appendix B: Explanation of Outside Practice Activity for Students

Study Chat Groups!

What: You will meet with your classmates outside of class, and you will speak English.

Where: Anywhere is OK. You can decide where to meet.

When: You should meet by the Monday of the assigned date. Every week you should spend time with a new group.

How long: You should spend at least 20-30 minutes, but you can spend more time if you want.

You will have to fill out a sheet describing what you did.

What you should talk about:

~Greetings and/or current topics in the book (e.g. games, food, etc.)

~New expressions

~Weather

~Talk about school life

~Discuss studying abroad

~Family, hobbies, hometown, movies, etc.

~Discuss the current topics in the book

~Bring some magazines and discuss that.

~ Talk about the teacher

~ Discuss American TV shows or whatever you are interested in

    ~ Food

Appendix C: Monitoring Student Participation

Students were asked to fill in the sheet below as a way to monitor student participation in Outside Speaking Activity.

Chat Group Sheets: Give these to the teacher on the day assigned. Hand in only one sheet per group.

Please write the name(s) of the students in the group:

Please write the place, time and how long you met (e.g. "We met on Monday in the cafeteria at one pm for one hour.):

Please describe what you talked about. You can write a summary. You should write at least 3 sentences:

Please sign.

1_____   2._____

3._____

Appendix D: Chat Group Concerns Sheet

Students were asked to fill in the sheet below as a way to 'enforce' student participation in Outside Speaking Activity.

Chat Group Concerns Sheet

Please write down your partner's name if you think your partner is not carrying out the assignment or contributing in a productive way.

Please write down the reasons you do not think your partner is contributing to the speaking assignment.