

# Students' English Oral Proficiency and Intercultural Interaction in a Speech Contest

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## **Abstract**

Second language learners require sufficient opportunities to communicate in the target language outside of the classroom environment in order to improve fluency. An extracurricular activity, such as a speech contest, offers a structured forum for both Japanese and international students to practice their respective second language (L2) and promote intercultural exchange. This study focuses on outcomes of oral English proficiency and intercultural interaction patterns among English language learners participating in a speech contest event. Self-evaluation of oral proficiency was conducted through questionnaires, and the degree of interaction with international students in preparing for a speech contest was observed. The findings of this study showed that participants in this English-language event self-reported an improvement in English speaking skills along with improved confidence in interacting with international students in English.

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**Keywords :** English as a second language, speech contest, English oral proficiency, intercultural interaction

## 1. Introduction

In the past two decades in Japan, ambitious policies have been announced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology (MEXT) to increase international student numbers at Japanese higher education institutions. With the aims of “overcoming Japan’s younger generation’s inward tendency and fostering human resources who can positively meet future challenges and succeed in the global field” (MEXT, 2020), MEXT has promoted and funded initiatives for Japanese universities to accept international students to study on campus alongside Japanese students. This physical presence of Japanese and international students of various nationalities is what is seen as internationalization or *kokusaika*. Studies of how international students socialize and form interpersonal relationships amongst themselves and Japanese students have been conducted (Kumamoto-Healey, 2010), showing “a lack of (or insufficient) interactions between Japanese and international students” (pp. 75), thus many universities have been actively promoting intercultural events and activities on campus to encourage interaction.

In accordance with expectations set by the Japanese Government, Momoyama Gakuin University has also set out to internationalize its campus and enhance students’ English communication skills. Compulsory receptive and communicative English skills classes are held for freshmen in all faculties, and a range of content and specific purpose-based elective classes (ESP) are also offered by the Language Center. Additionally, seminars and events are held outside of class time giving an opportunity for Japanese and international students to interact and utilize their respective L2. One such

event was a speech contest that was planned and implemented in December, 2019. International students were given the opportunity to present in Japanese, and vice versa Japanese students to present in English. This university's international exchange program accepts students from various partner schools around the world for one semester (22 International Exchange Students for the Spring Semester, 2020), in addition to 166 degree-seeking international students. Both groups of students are hereafter collectively referred to as 'international students'. Undergraduate students (predominantly Japanese) are provided with a dedicated space (St. John's Hall) where they can freely interact with international students, therefore, it can be assumed that in the context of this investigation that the type of English speakers most commonly interacted with are international students, followed by native English teachers. The intention of this paper is to look at the extent to which a non-mandatory event such as a speech contest promotes a desire for intercultural interaction and what improvements are found in English oral communication skills.

## **2. Research Questions**

In the implementation of a speech contest with learners of English, the authors intended to address the following questions:

- (1) Did the students demonstrate improvement or increased confidence in regard to their English ability?
- (2) What was the effect of a speech contest on their desire to interact with international students in English on campus?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Speech Contest Format

Oral presentations have advantages in fostering both speaking and interaction skills as mentioned above, but speaking activities in class can raise the anxiety level of learners, even if they are successful ones (Horwitz, 2001). An oral presentation activity such as a speech contest outside of a familiar environment, such as a classroom, tests a student's confidence of their own L2 ability. The pressure of being observed by a live audience while being evaluated in accordance with the assessment criteria would undoubtedly cause pressure to perform, hence, challenging the confidence of participants. As this may adversely affect students, especially those with a high anxiety level, it was decided that participation in this inaugural speech contest was not to be mandatory. Students themselves could make an autonomous decision to participate. Even with voluntary participation, a number of students were motivated to get involved. When learning a second language, students are motivated by numerous internal and external variables, as purported in a study of Japanese students studying English Communication by Kawasaki et al. (2019). They hypothesized and demonstrated that students show change in their L2 motivation. It was expected that similar results could be seen here as international students also participated, and social interaction with international students was desirable.

The speech contest was designed with two categories, one for students of English (mainly Japanese students), and one for students of Japanese (international students). Consideration was made to offer differentiating categories based on student ability, therefore the English speech contest was di-

vided into two levels of ability, lower and higher level speeches. Coffield (2004) insists teachers need to be aware of student's strengths and limitations. Accordingly, they should prepare tasks set to their level.

The first section (Section A) was a recitation exercise designed for students with beginner to lower intermediate language competence. Participants possessed various levels of oral English proficiency and no prerequisites were applied. This was suitable for students who do not have confidence or ability to write a speech in their L2. Ideally students would all have unlimited time and have high levels of motivation to prepare their own speeches, yet in reality the major consideration was the time undergraduates had to prepare for this contest. A pre-prepared speech was chosen for this level. It was thought elementary level participants would be more inclined to participate if they did not have the added stress of writing their own speeches (Head, 2016). An excerpt of a Steve Jobs speech was chosen (See Appendix 1) and shortened to make it under one minute. Gallo (2017) views Steve Jobs as the ideal figure for building personal presentation skills. He suggests the Apple Corporation figurehead provides unequalled influence on the world stage, due to his charismatic nature and influence across demographics. Regardless of the notoriety, many of the Steve Jobs keynote speeches go to great length of detail which is time consuming for the ESL student to grasp understanding.

Section B participants were required to create their own material. Bradley (2006) insists speech contests are ideal for learners to develop an individual voice. This encapsulates the four strands of communication which include reading, speaking, listening and writing. The topic was to explain one's own interest in a two minute speech. Although the actual performance time is

only two minutes, students may take many hours to complete this project. Dias (2000) recommends Japanese ESL learners should be given opportunities to express themselves in oral presentation projects. These projects should be seen as empowering tasks rather than those causing discomfort. In order to develop communication skills, students in Section B were not given visual aids or allowed to read from scripts as support. Bellezza and Reddy (1978) asserts the benefits of rote learning in ESL for storage of information and retrieval. In a similar view Ormond (1995) concurs the concept of memorization by having positive outcomes psychologically when the topic is of interest. Students in this contest were not given any advice on how to remember their speeches. However, their classroom teachers provided support in correcting language errors in the week leading up to the event.

### **3.2 Assessment**

Assessment criteria for both parts were developed by the teachers themselves. Venema (2013) states the accuracy of scoring between assessors can vary, especially when the people adjudicating are from both native and non-native backgrounds. In a similar view, Carrigan (2017) warns judges from western countries will be attracted to a polished delivery. This suggests they may be influenced by a stylish participant, unlike their peers from Japan who are sympathetic towards body language and pronunciation. Judging was conducted by three native and two non-native English instructors. In both sections A and B, each speaker's confidence and engagement with the audience was itemized into categories, as shown in appendix 2. Breaking down each area of assessment once again for rater training was not conducted due to time constraints. This is in accordance with the stance that classroom

teachers have few chances for rater training and expecting consistency from all judges is unrealistic (Knoch et al., 2007). Judges' evaluations of pronunciation, understanding of content, and body language was given from each individual judge based on their own perceptions. However, a framework for scoring was in place to ease the cognitive load for the judges. The overall score was the only assessment tool used for deciding an overall winner.

### 3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected from participants of both A & B sections in the form of questionnaires using both set responses and open questions immediately after the event. Follow-up interviews were conducted with high scoring students. Questions 2 to 6 asked about students' desire to get help from a native speaker of English, whether they approached someone for help, previous intercultural interaction with international students from the same university, and the expected outcomes. Questions 7 to 9 referred to feelings of personal growth.

## 4. Results and Analysis

Analysis of questionnaires implemented after the event found seven out of nine students felt they had improved their English speaking skills. Other areas where improvement was identified are shown in table 1.

Table 1 *Which English skill areas do you think could improve through this event? (n=9, multiple responses allowed)*

Speaking skills	Pronunciation	Writing	Reading	Listening skills
7	4	3	3	1

In this speech contest, it was found through follow-up interviews that the

prize winners of both A and B sections had more experience interacting with foreign people, including international students. The winner of section A was a member of an international student support group, while the winner of Section B attended an international course in her high school days where she had English class every day with native English teachers. This event was planned and conducted as a joint Japanese and English speech contest for both Japanese and international students. It can be assumed interaction between both groups will occur naturally, so the opportunity to communicate and make friends with each other will be a motivating factor for students to participate in the contest. As shown in table 2, Japanese participants were asked for their experience in talking to international students at this university. Participants either had numerous interactions with international students or none at all.

Table 2 *No. of times having spoken to international students (n=9)*

None	Once	Twice	Three times or more
3	0	1	5

Students were further asked the location where the interaction took place, with the most common response being the St. John's (International Student) Hall (25%), classrooms (20%), library (15%), cafeteria (15%), bus or train (10%). Other locations given were the convenience store on campus, and the student dormitory. These results, St. John's Hall and the student dormitory in particular, are in line with the expectation that a number of Japanese students registered in the international student dormitory Resident Assistant Program or Volunteer Student Support Program are already motivated to interact with international students, and had motivation to partici-

pate in this event. Furthermore, in order to assess their interaction with English native speakers, participants were asked if they had thought about seeking help during the preparation stage from a native speaker. Responses indicated all students thought their English would improve through communicating with native speakers, and as shown in table 3, the most common response being in the areas of listening skills and speaking confidence.

Table 3 *Areas of English that you think will improve through speaking to native speakers (Multiple answers allowed).*

Skill Area	No. of Responses
Listening skills	4
Pronunciation	3
Speaking Fluency	3
Confidence to speak	4
Vocabulary	3

Whilst Japanese students understand the benefits of, and often wish to communicate with foreigners in English, some do not have the confidence to initiate contact. Anxiety is a common feeling associated with intercultural contact, as a result of which they tend to avoid contact with people of differing cultures (Morita, 2014). Anxiety affects our communication and is associated with avoidance (Duronto, Nishida, and Nakayama, 2005, as cited in Morita, 2012). For this reason, we compared participants' intentions to get help from or to practice with a native speaker with the outcomes. Five participants (n=9) did consider it, citing reasons such as "they are more used to speaking English than I (sic)". Some reasons also demonstrated motivation for learning, such as "I thought I could continue to make efforts with their encouragement", and "I thought I could make friends with foreign students through asking for help". This demonstrated students had an addi-

tional motivation of increasing social networks through the study of English as a second language.

The results, however, showed that only four students did end up seeking help from or practice with international students. One participant stated “we taught each other our respective language in speech (sic)”, indicating again the motivation for social interaction through language acquisition. Two students chose to get help from native English teachers instead, with the students giving the following justification: “I wanted to know whether or not my pronunciation and pause would be correct”; and “I wanted to have some advice regarding my pronunciation and way of delivering speech”. Although they could have approached international students for help, they felt they wanted professional advice rather than from their peers to improve their English skills. Lack of confidence in speaking to international students or native speakers of English in the audience during the speech contest was evident by over half of the respondents (5) stating that they were nervous about doing so. When prompted for reasons, some were self-deprecating “I have no self-confidence”, and “I am not good at speaking English”, consistent with Morita’s (2012) findings that in the Japanese context domestic students’ anxieties are related to insecurities about their English communicative abilities. Language can be a barrier in intercultural interaction and friendship. Regardless, students overall felt positive afterwards that they had gained more confidence to communicate with either native speakers of English or international students, as demonstrated in the final questions of the post-contest questionnaire. Four respondents (n=9) stated that they had gained some confidence, four stated they had gained quite a bit of confidence and one respondent much confidence.

## 5. Conclusion

A non-mandatory language focused extra-curricular event such as a speech contest has been shown to give opportunities for students to foster their L2 presentation and oral communication skills. Through providing a practically structured forum interaction between international and domestic students did occur, although more investigation needs to be conducted to quantify whether there is a significant change in internationalization. This study has shown Japanese students have an interest in exercising their L2, and that an event such as a speech contest is a suitable platform to implement this while also fostering interaction between various student groups.

As mentioned above, Morita (2012) stipulated the lack of interaction between Japanese students and their international student counterparts is an issue to be addressed by universities. An event such as a speech contest provides a socializing scenario for students in which to practically use their L2 outside their comfort zone. Facilitators of English programs in higher education need to conduct and promote activities outside of the standard curriculum so as to foster confidence with English oral abilities when socializing. Providing opportunities to communicate in English with international students promotes confidence in communicating orally in English. Although the supporting data is limited, this initial study will provide a basis on which to conduct further research on the merits of extracurricular English-language events.

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### **Appendices**

#### **Appendix 1: Recitation Speech Script**

Author: Steve Jobs

“The only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And, the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven’t found it yet, keep looking. And, don’t settle. As with all matters of the heart, you’ll know when you find it. Sometimes, life is going to hit you in the head with a brick. Don’t lose faith. I’m convinced that the only thing that kept me going, is that I loved what I did. You’ve got to find what you love.”

#### **Appendix 2: Assessment**

Section A: Recitation Assessment Categories

人間文化研究 第14号

<i>Category</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Max Points</i>
Rhythm		20
Pronunciation	Clarity	20
Vocal Projection		20
Content	Understanding	20
Body Language	Facial expressions	20
	TOTAL	100

Section B: Self-authored Presentation Assessment Categories

<i>Category</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Max Points</i>
Memory		20
Content	Content and structure	20
Delivery	Rhythm and intonation	20
Interest	Interest and engagement level from audience	20
	TOTAL	80