From Anxiety to Engagement: Inclusive Strategies for Low-Proficiency EFL Learners in Japan

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The Asian Conference on Education 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Previous research on English language learning in Japan indicates that many students feel nervous about the communicative aspects of class, partly due to limited opportunities to use English in natural settings (Gullikson, 2024, pp. 15–16). This paper examines an English program at a Japanese professional university (専門職大学) in which students engaged in weekly conversations with native English speakers from the United States over a one-month period. The study investigates how this program influenced students' intrinsic motivation to learn English while managing cognitive load during authentic communication. Although conversational classes in the institution are typically reserved for intermediate to advanced learners, findings show that with targeted scaffolding by instructors, even low-proficiency students were able to participate meaningfully. The results suggest that structured interaction with native speakers, combined with pedagogical scaffolding, can reduce learner anxiety, support cognitive processing, and enhance motivation in low-proficiency EFL contexts. These findings have implications for designing inclusive communicative programs in vocational education settings.

Keywords: EFL, Japan, conversation classes, native speaker, low-proficiency, motivation, cognitive load, instructional design

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Introduction

This study builds on previous research on cognitive load and motivation in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, taking a special interest in the way classroom considerations differ in a professional university (専門職大学) setting in Japan. Abdul Hadi (2025) had previously looked into managing cognitive load in a Content Language Integrated Classroom through the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) as a course subject in a Japanese vocational college (専門学校) among intermediate and advanced proficiency EFL students. Earlier, Abdul Hadi and Ekstrom (2024) had looked into the critical thinking aspect of SDG courses on advanced proficiency students in the same vocational college. However, despite belonging to the same parent company, the students that attended these institutions differed in terms of language capabilities as well as motivations. This study takes previous theoretical understandings on cognitive load and motivation, links them with established classroom pedagogies, and applies them to a language exchange program conducted as part of an English-language course at a professional university in Kanagawa, Japan. This paper hopes to suggest a method of managing low-proficiency students' motivations when learning and utilizing English in their everyday lives.

Japan, English Language Education, and the Professional University

Despite Japan's growth in number of foreign residents, Japan's indigenous population remains the majority at over 97% (Inoue, 2025). With such a statistic, it is perhaps no surprise that EFL classes find Japanese students generally unmotivated to learn the target language (Gullikson, 2024, p. 14). Indeed, because of a lack of real-world opportunities to engage with and practice the language, many Japanese students face "language anxiety" in the EFL classroom. Language anxiety is characterized as "the fear or nervousness associated with 'making mistakes' or receiving negative feedback from a teacher, peer, or a native speaker of the target language" and can lead to negative effects in learning and producing the language (Gullikson, 2024, p. 16). This, coupled with the fact that Japanese students have gone through many years of learning EFL through sheer memorization to answer exams (Gullikson, 2024; Vicente et al., 2024), creates a generally unmotivated EFL learner once the student graduates to higher learning institutions.

An important point to note regarding EFL research in Japan is that they have tended to be based on university or high school students where the demographics steer towards a monocultural classroom made up of Japanese students between 18 to 24 years of age. There are significantly less studies conducted in another higher educational institution: the vocational college, or the 専門学校 (*senmon gakko*). In addition to the difference in purpose of studying, where these institutions find students who seek specific training that would prepare them for a particular industry, each vocational college boasts students from varying types of backgrounds. This is especially true in the case of one vocational college in Kanagawa, where students differed in terms of age, nationalities, as well as work experience (Abdul Hadi, 2025, Abdul Hadi & Ekstrom, 2024). In Abdul Hadi's (2025) study, it was noted that in the Kanagawa vocational college, older students' motivation for learning English was mostly extrinsic, owing perhaps to their previous work experience where they saw how English could be used in the workplace (Abdul Hadi, 2025, p. 93). For the younger students under 25 years of age, they joined a class on SDGs because of their own interest in the subject – perhaps due to the topical relevance of the course (Abdul Hadi, 2025, p. 93). These studies show that the motivations that go into EFL learning in Japan may find more nuance when more research is given to other higher learning institutions besides universities.

A new category had been introduced in Japan in 2023: the professional university, or the 専門職大学 (*senmon-shoku daigaku*). Unlike a regular university or a vocational college, a professional university has both theory as well as practice in a professional field of choice. Students in a professional university have on-site training outside the university campus for over 600 hours through a 4-year program (approximately 15 weeks of training). The classes in a professional university are also kept small, with a maximum of 40 students per class. Once a professional university degree has been obtained, the student can use it to either obtain a job, a graduate degree, or even study abroad. As of September 2025, there are only 16 private professional universities, and 3 public professional universities (MEXT, 2025). EFL research in terms of the effects of cognitive load on student motivations is understandably lacking and thus would be beneficial towards providing a more holistic view of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Japan.

Understanding Motivation, Cognitive Load, and the EFL Classroom

Motivation is a popular topic amongst EFL instructors. It is undeniably an important aspect of ELT because no matter how much a teacher prepares for a class, the efforts could be undone by the motivations or lack of motivation from the students. But what do we actually mean when we talk about student motivations? For the purposes of this study, this paper will look at motivation from two perspectives: firstly, from the students' perspectives of their own capabilities and interests, and secondly, the students' perspective of the tasks set out for them in the EFL classroom.

In terms of students' perspectives of their own capabilities and interests, Zoltan Dörnyei has outlined two theories in motivation studies: self-efficacy theory and self-worth theory (1998, p. 119). In the former, this theory revolves around a person's perception of their own capabilities and how that drives their actions. When thinking about this theory from the EFL perspective, a student's perception of their English language skills might affect how they behave in class. For example, if they feel that their conversational skills are lacking, they might be less motivated to take part in communicative exercises. This perception of competence in a subject can also be termed "academic self-efficacy" (Hirosawa et al., 2024). Self-worth theory, on the other hand, is related to a feeling of needing to "maintain one's self-esteem" (Dörnyei, 1998, p. 119); from the perspective of the EFL classroom, students may or may not take part in an activity motivated by a need to ensure that they don't lose face because of a perceived lack of skill.

In the previous section, a discussion had been made on the unique position of English language education in Japan. In this sense, we could talk about the "value" of the EFL class to Japanese students. This paper will use the four components of motivation value as outlined by Eccles and Wigfield (1995): attainment value, intrinsic value, extrinsic utility value, and cost. The first three aspects mentioned are considered across a "positive" scale where attainment value refers to how a task might align with one's "personal values and needs"; intrinsic value brings "enjoyment or pleasure"; and extrinsic utility value brings about "usefulness" in the future. The "cost" is the "negative" aspect of this value system where a student might deliberate the effort, time, and emotional costs of engaging in a task. When looking at how a student might value EFL classroom activities, they might then look across all four of these dimensions which would then increase or decrease motivation to take part in the lesson (Dörnyei, 1998, p. 120).

The motivational "costs" could also be related to the concept of the cognitive load needed to carry out an activity. In this theory, it is assumed that a person has "limited working memory"

at a given time where the mind is able to "deal with information for no more than a few seconds with almost all information lost after about 20 seconds unless it is refreshed by rehearsal" (van Merrienboer & Sweller, 2005, p. 148). From a pedagogical perspective, this means that a student's capability in approaching a task is related to how difficult the task is and the amount of "mental space" the student has to deal with it. Therefore, the higher the cognitive load, the more difficult the task appears to be for the student, and thus the higher the motivational "costs".

When thinking of designing a class or a lesson, it is integral that a teacher takes into account three different types of cognitive load: intrinsic (ICL), extraneous (ECL), and germane (Sweller, 2010; Seller et al., 1998). ICL refers to how difficult the task actually is; for example, "Mary Had a Little Lamb" would have a lower ICL than that of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" to an EFL learner. ECL is the manner in which the task is presented; for example, when presenting the aforementioned songs to the students, presenting them purely as a listening exercise without lyrics might invoke a higher level of ECL than if the students had a piece of text to follow during the listening activity. Finally, the germane deals with the cognitive "demands of learning itself"; how difficult do students find learning English in Japan? It is therefore unsurprising that:

> Good pedagogical practice, then, will carefully assess the cognitive burden placed by the material to be learned (intrinsic load) as well as the instructional formats (extraneous and germane loads) in order to avoid cognitive overload. (Groff, 2020, p. 76)

Communicative English Classes in Japan

One way that EFL instructors have attempted to increase motivation in learning and utilizing the target language is through creating more communicative activities or classes. In an early study on learning English in an ESL classroom, Long (1983) cited educational philosopher Krashen's natural approach to language learning as a better teaching method for non-native speakers as it afforded more meaningful communication to the students (Long, 1983, p. 96). Decades later, EFL teachers continuously seek to provide such meaningful communication in their classes, especially in Japan.

One activity that is frequently used in EFL courses in Japan can be labelled as "conversation classes", usually named "English cafe" in higher learning institutions. As evidenced by the name, the goal of such a class is to provide students with a low-stress environment that focuses on practicing their verbal skills. In one study that looked into an English Cafe as an extracurricular program, the authors found that it was generally seen favorably by the students to "improve their linguistic skills, especially their aural and oral proficiency" (Johnson and Hiratsuka, 2018, p. 40). In this study, the students' proficiency levels varied, with participation encouraged from all levels, including that of beginner's proficiency. However, the authors noted that for students with lower proficiency, they "should be provided with the necessary scaffolding to feel comfortable in partaking in the activities".

Another English Cafe study took place in a nursing school at Otemae University. This activity was a non-credit elective held once a week (Nishimura et al., 2021, p. 25). These students had strong external motivation as there is a very real growing need to attend to English-speaking patients in their future jobs. One similarity between the sample group in Nishimura et al.'s (2021) study and this research is that the students are of low-proficiency in English. This paper provides an interesting look at what can be achieved using conversation-based activities for these groups of students. One activity that seemed to work was memorization of a script that

led to building student confidence; through this confidence, students would attempt to speak without looking at a script (Nishimura et al., 2021, p. 50). Another important consideration was the encouragement of any type of communication to foster good relationships; in this study, this includes friendly expressions, body language, and even one-word answers (Nishimura et al., 2021, p. 50). This shows that students also can enhance their English communicative capabilities beyond making grammatically-correct constructions.

In Shinshu University, the students led an English Cafe activity that were TED Talk-styled events where the focus was on "thinking, expressing, and communicating" ideas rather than on practicing English per se (Fujita & Ong, 2018, p. 33). A noteworthy aspect of this activity is that the students who have had experience navigating an English-speaking world (those who have studied abroad or who were international students) were more motivated to join discussion-based activities and to be more globally minded (Fujita & Ong, 2018, pp. 41–42). It is an interesting point that might provide a layer of nuance to studies on communicative activities in a Japanese EFL classroom - to what extent do students' own interactions with the outside world fuel their motivation to learn English?

Beyond these English Cafes, Gomez (2021) discussed project-based learning (PBL) as a method to encourage high-proficiency students to communicate more naturally in English. In his study, while the students all held TOEIC scores between 710 and 965, Gomez found that because the students were all Japanese, they would opt to use Japanese to "efficiently" complete their tasks even though they were all highly motivated and desired to use English more in the classroom (Gomez, 2021, p. 40). This appears to show that it is not only low-proficiency students who struggle to maintain a conversation in English, but also high-proficiency students too. Therefore, when planning an activity, an instructor needs to consider the extent to which a student may use Japanese (or a different native language) when attempting to complete a task.

Finally, a particularly useful communicative opportunity for EFL learning is through exchange programs with native English speakers. Obviously, this is not a privilege that all higher learning institutions can afford to provide. Tsuneyoshi (2005) has discussed the difficulty of creating such a program in Japan and, surprisingly, even in the prestigious University of Tokyo itself. The author cites the gap between local students' language capabilities and the language required in an English-oriented lecture, as well as the local students' cultural expectations towards a university course and the international (Western) expectations of a university course (Tsuneyoshi, 2005, pp. 71–72, p. 79). As such, in the early days of implementing an exchange program at the University of Tokyo, specific courses had to be created for the exchange students. Unfortunately, these courses did not necessarily match the linguistic capabilities of the local students. Tsuneyoshi's (2005) paper showed the intricacy of communication between native and non-native speakers of English.

These studies show the various ways in which Japanese EFL classrooms have attempted to encourage its students to use the target language. Using their discussions and results as inspiration, a study was conducted in a professional university to test the usage of conversation classes on student motivation to use English for a communicative purpose.

Methodology

Acquiring EFL Through Conversational Classes With English Native Speakers in a Professional University

Applied English Communication is a year-long course that is split across two semesters. The students in the professional university in Kanagawa are divided according to their English language proficiency: those acquiring a TOEIC score of above 500 are placed in the "A" or Advanced English class, while those with a score lower than 500 are placed in the "B" or Basic English class. The participants in this study were in the "B" class. In this class, the textbook used as the basis for the conversational activities was *Glances of Japan* (2020) by Sakabe Toshiyuki (坂部俊行), Okajima Noriaki (岡島徳昭), and Howard Tarnoff.

The B class consisted of 25 students; 24 of the students were either Japanese and/or had grown up and been educated in Japan, while one student had immigrated to Japan as an adult. 17 students were boys and 8 students were girls; 11 students were 18 years old, 7 were 19 years old, 5 were 20 years old, and 2 were 21 years old. 15 of the students were first-year students and new to the class; 8 students were second-year students, and 2 were third-year students. As mentioned earlier, the B class consisted of students who scored under 500 points in TOEIC; however, it is worth noting that only one student scored above 400 points. 7 students scored above 300 points, 12 students scored over 200 points, 2 students scored over 100 points, and 3 students scored under 100 points. Scoring under 100 points is objectively near-impossible given the way in which TOEIC calculates the points. For these three students, they most probably had left their answers blank, resulting in a randomized placeholder score. From these results, however, it can be concluded that the B class consisted of students with beginner level proficiency, similar to CEFR A1 or A2 level.

In the first semester of the Applied English Communication course, the professional university had set up a language and cultural exchange program with American university students as well as a university professor. In the B class, the fifteen weeks of classes were divided as follows:

Preparation Stage (Weeks 1 to 5)

Before class began, students answered a survey looking into their interest in learning English as well as their feelings towards speaking with native English speakers. These questions included:

1. How confident are you in speaking English? あなたは英語を話すことにどれくらい自信がありますか?
2. How confident are you in your English listening skills? あなたは英語のリスニングにどれくらい自信がありますか?
3. How interested are you in learning English? あなたは英語を学ぶことにどれくらい興味がありますか?
4. How do you feel about speaking with the American students next month? 来月、アメリカの学生たちと話すことについてどう思いますか？

Students answered these questions on a 5-point and 4-point scale. Questions 1 and 2 offered the scale from 0 being "Not confident at all" to 5 being "Very confident"; Question 3 offered the scale from 0 being "Not interested at all" to 5 being "Very interested"; Question 4 avoided

a neutral number and gave the following options: Excited, Nervous, but excited, Nervous, and No strong feelings.

The first five weeks were spent working on the content of the textbook and preparing for a lecture and discussion session with the exchange students and professor. The topics chosen from the textbook are based on the ease of the content (being low ICL) as well as the possible interest it might generate for both the professional university students as well as the exchange students later. The topics were:

1) Animal cafes
2) Stand-up eateries (立ち食い)
3) Japanese spas (スーパー銭湯)
4) Karaoke

During these classes, students familiarized themselves with the English vocabulary associated with the topics through listening, reading, and writing exercises. Later, they answered discussion questions based on their own personal experiences or opinions, and then they were to create a set of ten questions to ask the American students on these topics.

In the fifth and final week of the preparation period, students were given lecture points provided by the American professor and they were briefed on strategies to deal with a 50-minute lecture session completely in English.

Language and Cultural Exchange Stage (Weeks 6–10)

The sixth week saw the A and B students join in one class to listen to an introductory lecture in English by an American professor. The A and B students engaged in communicative exchanges with both each other as well as the professor during this lecture.

The seventh, eighth, and ninth weeks saw the students with 6 exchange students. The first 50 minutes of each class were spent reviewing notes and materials from the Preparatory Stage. The final 50 minutes were spent with the exchange students. 5 of the exchange students were boys and one was a girl. The professional university students sat in groups of 3 or 4 and the exchange students took turns speaking with each group for 8 minutes. On Weeks 7 and 8, students answered survey questions about their experiences with the exchange students:

1. How confident are you in speaking English? あなたは英語を話すことにどれくらい自信がありますか?
2. How confident are you in your English listening skills? あなたは英語のリスニングにどれくらい自信がありますか?
3. How interested are you in learning English? あなたは英語を学ぶことにどれくらい興味がありますか?
4. You've already spoken to American students twice, but how do you feel about speaking to them two more times? アメリカの学生たちとはすでに 2 回お話されていますが、あと 2 回お話することについてどうお考えですか？
5. Please rate the level of difficulty for American students. アメリカの学生の理解の難しさを評価してください
6. How helpful was our lesson where we prepared for these? これらの会話の準備をするためのレッスンはどれくらい役に立ちましたか？

7. Did you use your notes and answers during the conversations? 会話中にメモや回答を使用しましたか?

Answer options for Questions 1–4 were the same as for the pre-class survey. Question 5 provided a scale of 1 being "I couldn't understand anything まったく理解" and 5 being "It was very easy to understand よく理解". Question 6 provided a similar scale where 1 was "Not helpful at all まったく役に立たなかった" and 5 was "Very helpful とても役に立った". Finally, Question 7 had three options: "Yes", "No", or "Sometimes".

In the final language and cultural exchange class, the A and B students joined classes again. For the first 50 minutes, the students used the preparatory materials from class. The final 50 minutes were based on more impromptu conversations. Students answered a final survey at the end of this session, which included the following questions:

1. I can actively participate in conversations in English. (1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree)
2. I can communicate smoothly in English. (1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree)
3. I am confident in my English listening ability. (1: Not at all - 5: Very much)
4. I think my English-speaking ability will improve. (1: Strongly disagree – 5: Strongly agree)
5. I can use English words and expressions naturally. (1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree)
6. I can speak English without worrying about grammar. (1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree)
7. I am confident in my reading and writing skills. (1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree)
8. I am motivated to learn English. (1: Not at all, 5: Very much)

Review Stage (Weeks 11 to 15)

The final five weeks were spent on the textbook and preparing for presentations and final interviews with the class lecturer. Students studied four more chapters:

1. Ramen / Soba
2. Gyudon / Bento

Based on these chapters, the students answered questions on their favorite food. They presented these answers to their class and then memorized the answers for a final interview with the instructor.

Results and Discussion

This class had been designed to ensure that students would become more motivated and confident in using the English language skills learned in the classroom. Conversation-based classes when one is in the beginner's stage of language learning is daunting, thus appropriate scaffolding was set up to ensure that the ICL of the course content and the ECL of the instructional design didn't overwhelm the students. With these considerations in place, it was hoped that the B students would be more motivated to use English with their peers.

Before class started, students generally self-reported that their English capabilities were low. In terms of listening skills, 44% of the students reported that they had "No confidence at all"

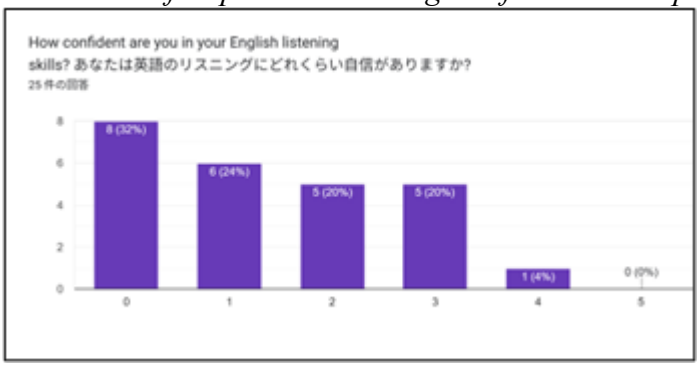
and no student reported that they were “Very confident” in their speaking capabilities. 32% of students reported that they had “No confidence at all” in their listening skills as well. This seemed to correlate with their low TOEIC scores prior to entering class. A breakdown of the answers can be seen in the following figures.

Figure 1

Students’ Self-Report on Speaking Confidence – Preparation Stage

Figure 2

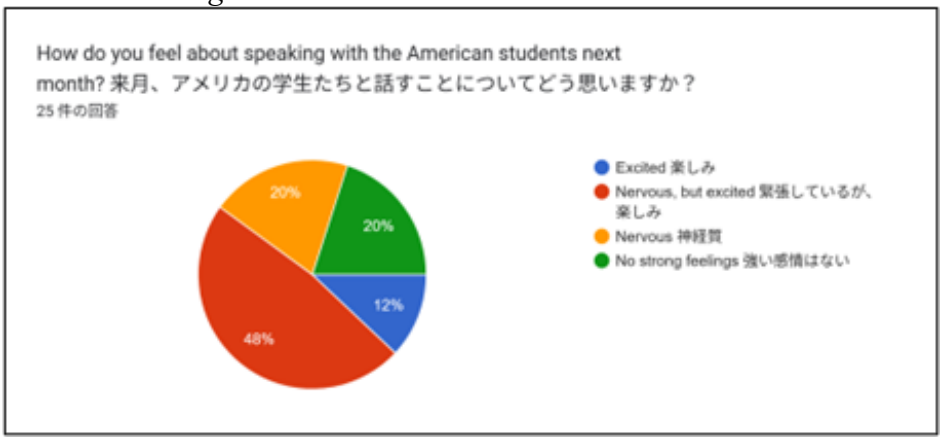
Students’ Self-Report on Listening Confidence – Preparation Stage



However, despite their relatively low confidence in their English capabilities, 20% of the students reported that they were “Very interested” in learning English, and 60% of students were either “Excited” or “Nervous, but excited” about speaking with the American exchange students.

Figure 3

Students’ Feelings towards Conversation Classes With American Students – Preparation Stage



These results seem to mimic the students' preparation for the conversation classes. Based on the instructor's own notes taken while observing the class, the students were generally quiet but a majority were diligent in completing the textbook work. Interestingly, the first-year students had a harder time completing questions with their own opinions and many struggled to come up with ten questions on their topics to ask the exchange students. This may be due to the students' lack of connection to a world outside of Japan, and thus they lacked the capability to imagine the type of questions or answers that would be relevant to such an interaction. The students' capabilities seem to mirror those in Fujita and Ong's (2018) previous study, where the English Cafe program was attended mostly by students who had undergone an overseas exchange program, perhaps indicating a better capability to hold more unstructured conversations (41–42). Second and third year students who had already engaged in the exchange program the previous year were more capable of generating answers as well as questions for the American students.

Because of the students' quietness during the preparatory stage, it was surprising that they were quite communicative during the language and cultural exchange stage. Though a handful of students hung back and did not speak much, they were otherwise engaged and made an effort to respond. This seemed to be reflected in the survey results where students' confidence ratings went up: approximately 36% of students reported their speaking ability as a "3" or "4", showing moderately confident views and approximately 51% of students reported their listening ability as between "3" to "5", showing moderately to very confident views on their skills.

Figure 4

Students' Self-Report on Speaking Confidence – Language and Cultural Exchange Stage

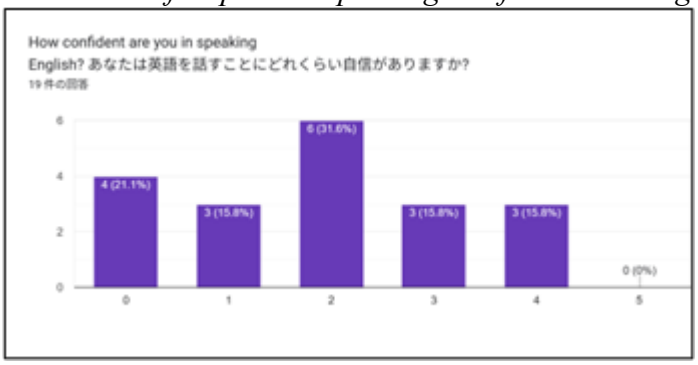
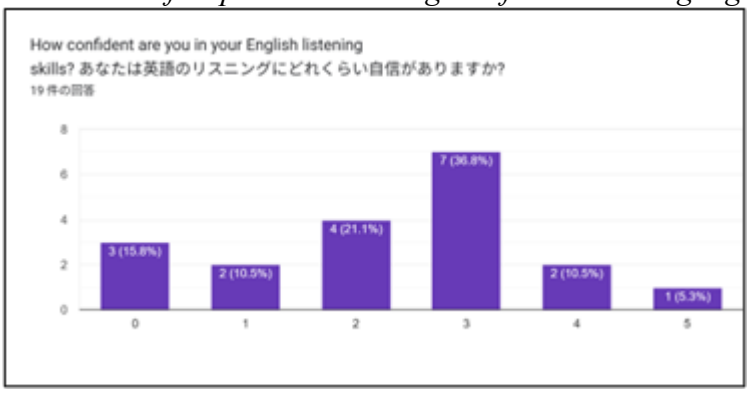


Figure 5

Students' Self-Report on Listening Confidence – Language and Cultural Exchange Stage



Interestingly, the levels of motivation remained about the same as before starting the class. When asked whether they had used the materials prepared for the conversations, only one person answered “No”, with others answering either “Yes” or “Sometimes”.

Figure 6
Students’ Usage of Notes During Conversation Classes – Language and Cultural Exchange Stage

Indeed, when observing the student interactions, it was obvious that the structured questions with prepared answers helped even low-proficiency students. Because the students repeated the questions and answers a total of six times in a session, they were able to progress to more impromptu questions and answers with the exchange students as time progressed. The American exchange students themselves were proactive and used simple words as well as translation apps to help when there were difficult words or concepts that they wanted to convey. But this is not to say that all of the conversations were held with apps – students used a mixture of apps, their notes, as well as clarifying statements to help with communication. When talking on personal subjects, some brought up photos from their phones.

Towards the end of the program, when evaluating the responses, only 14 students had been present for the beginning, the middle, and the final surveys. In terms of interest level in English, 5 students had remained the same (being “interested” to “very interested”, marking “3” to “5” on the scale) and 5 students had become more interested in English. Most rewardingly, 11 students reported a higher sense of confidence in their English language skills at the end of their interactions with the American exchange students while 3 remained the same. At the beginning, 6 of the 14 had noted that they were “Not confident at all” and had then found some degree of confidence over the five–week period.

In this sense, students had an increase in their feelings of academic self-efficacy. By ensuring that the course content had a low ICL, with content based on subjects that were familiar and interesting to the students, the ECL could afford to be higher. In this case, the task of speaking in English with native speakers was definitely a high ECL task. However, the preparatory materials and sessions where students had time to compose their answers and then practice them, helped reduce the ECL of the conversation sessions, leading perhaps to a higher sense of confidence in the students.

Concluding Remarks and Future Considerations

This is a small-scale study with many limitations due to funding constraints and a lack of resources. However, these initial results show that with proper scaffolding, even low-proficiency students with low-motivation could increase both motivation and confidence in their English language capabilities. Future considerations could be made for a long-term

program where students continue to keep in touch with the exchange students to see if this would help maintain confidence and motivation in using the English language. As this study is on self-perception of capabilities, it is not interested in the actual marks the students received from the English proficiency tests. As seen through decades of research on EFL teaching in Japan, despite (or perhaps because of) being exam-oriented, students did not develop communicative abilities in English. However, perhaps when the goal is to actually communicate through these types of exchange programs, students in Japan might see the relevance of learning the language. This study provides an optimistic assessment for using conversational activities with English native speakers as part of the instructional design in the Japanese EFL classroom.

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