Enhanced Motivation in an English-as-a-Foreign-Language Classroom: One-to-One Remote Lessons, Hylable Discussion, and Group/Paired Work

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The Southeast Asian Conference on Education 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
This study reports how an English classroom practice with information and communication technology (ICT) enhanced 17 Japanese university students' motivation and self-assessment regarding their speaking skills. This involved a 15-week class, meeting weekly for 90 minutes, plus additional 12 mandatory online lessons with English-speaking instructors from the Philippines. Each online lesson was 25 minutes long and based on a textbook that introduced topics focusing on personal interests and social issues. The Japanese students were required to speak on a one-to-one basis with the instructors, and a flipped-classroom format was used for in-person class sessions, wherein students shared their outcomes in groups and prepared for their next online lesson in pairs. Each group was provided with a recording device (Hylable Discussion) that recorded each member's utterances and analyzed the relative volume of talk among members, directions and frequencies of interactions, and talker/listener tendencies. At the end of the course, the participants reflected on their Hylable analysis results over the semester and answered questionnaires about course activities, including overseas online lessons, group work, and paired work. Most respondents felt an improvement in their speaking skills and decreased anxiety. Group and paired work were almost equally popular among the participants, although the Hylable analyses was not included in the paired work. This study provides practical tips for using ICT to enhance classroom activities.

Keywords: remote lessons, Hylable, paired work

Introduction

Japanese learners are generally rather quiet and not confident in speaking English. The Japanese school system is often criticized as ineffective because most Japanese people are unable to communicate in English well. However, a survey by Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute (2014) reported that more than 90% of junior and high school students felt enthusiastic about the idea of speaking English, and that they believed that the most important factor in learning English was to regularly speak the language.

In 2019, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) updated the course of study, highly promoting collaborations among students in the classroom (Matsuoka & Mizumoto, 2018). Group and paired activities are common in English classes at primary and secondary schools, and this has now extended to other subjects because active involvement and interaction with others while doing tasks is now preferred in the new course of study.

Another important consideration is how the pandemic influenced education practices. In 2020 and 2021, most classes were held online via Zoom, MS Teams, or other platforms. Although face-to-face classes have now been implemented again, remote lessons have the advantage of being able to conduct classes without physical restrictions. In particular, the use of information and communication technology (ICT) can help language learners relate to the speakers of their target languages, practice listening and speaking, and have a real conversation through online platforms. Thus, combining ICT with an active learning environment could help enhance Japanese students' motivation and confidence in communicating in English. In this paper, I would like to share my teaching experience in my English Presentation class at my university, wherein two types of ICT were incorporated: Hylable Discussion (a device that records and analyzes conversation) and *Logical Speaking* (an overseas remote one-to-one lesson program).

Hylable System for Communication Analysis in a Group

Hylable is a system that can analyze individual speakers' communication styles during a group discussion (Aburai, 2024; Matsuoka & Mizumoto, 2018; Matsuoka et al., 2022; Otake et al., 2024). We started using this system during the COVID-19 pandemic as an alternative to Zoom breakout rooms. During these breakout sessions, it is impossible to monitor all online groups simultaneously, which is one of the largest differences from the face-to-face classroom setting (see also Matsuoka et al., 2022; Nabei & Harada, 2022). When using Hylable, the students were more serious and actively participated in online group discussions since they were aware that they were being recorded and that their personal contributions would be analyzed (Matsuoka et al., 2022; Otake et al., 2024).

I previously reported an analysis on the use of Hylable in a content-based online class in 2021 (Toya, 2023). Students had group discussions regarding the provided topics of language acquisition theories and research based on an English textbook (*How Languages are Learned*). The discussions were done in Japanese, their first language, and Hylable had a positive effect on the students. In 2018, before the pandemic, Hylable was originally available with an egg-shaped microphone/recorder for analyzing face-to-face interactions. Aburai (2024) reported that his group discussion data was collected using the physical recorder in 2019, while the online version was used in 2020. Meanwhile, Matsuoka et al. (2022) used the online version of Hylable in her university English classroom, revealing that students desired more feedback from the system and their peers as they made progress in speaking. Moreover, Otake et al.

(2024) reported that students had positive perceptions regarding the assessment feedback from the Hylable system, which enabled them to objectively evaluate their communication styles and plan for further improvement.

In Fall 2023, I utilized the face-to-face version of Hylable, known as *Hylable Discussion*, for the first time in the same content-based class and the English Presentation class. Unlike the online version, the recorder needed to be physically set on the group table (Matsuoka & Mizumoto, 2018). The Hylable recorder is an egg-shaped device, around the size of a hand, with a circular base-sheet at the bottom that determines the directions of the individual speakers. For the purposes of teaching and research, the recorder was placed in the center of a group of four students (marked as A, B, C, or D, seated 90° to each other). The recorders were remotely controlled via a computer, and all utterances were immediately recorded for the automatic analysis.

Using the recorded data, the Hylable offers automatic, real-time analyses of the participants' communication styles. One graph indicates speaking dominance/volume by time, wherein individual speakers are marked in different colors, allowing a visualization of who spoke the most and when. This facilitates an analysis of turn-taking and the total utterance time by the speaker. The turn-taking figure includes arrows that indicate the directions and frequencies of speaking between the speakers. The individual speakers are represented by dots/circles, with their size indicating who spoke the most. The bar graphs of total utterance time also illustrate which participant spoke the most during the discussion. The most unique analysis offered is the triangle radar chart that indicates the personal communication patterns of each individual speaker. The top axis of the triangle shows the total utterance volume, the bottom-left indicates backchanneling, and the bottom-right indicates how much the speaker enlivens the conversation in the group. For example, a participant may be rather quiet (i.e., little total volume) yet backchanneled well by responding to the other speaker (i.e., "Really?," "Wow", etc.). This person may score high on the liven-up axis, which means that other members became lively and talkative after this person speaks. This analysis of the three axes can help us understand the various roles of the speakers during the discussion. In my classes, the results of these analyses were made available to the students.

Overseas One-to-One Remote Lessons With *Logical Speaking*

The second ICT introduced in my class was the course material called *Logical Speaking*, a 12-unit program including remote, one-to-one real-time speaking lessons with English-speaking instructors in the Philippines. The topics of the lessons are fixed and available in a printed workbook, and students are tasked to prepare for their online paired work using this workbook. The material was developed by Gakken in Japan, with a strong focus on speaking with a logical framework. The learner level is aimed at CEFR A2 to B1.

During the remote lesson, the English-speaking instructor appears on the top-right of the computer screen. Although the image is small, it is visually clear enough to understand facial expressions and gestures. A content slide that demonstrates the logical talk framework can be shared in the main screen, and a chat box is also available on the bottom-right. Although small talk and free exchanges were allowed, the 25-minute lesson was built around topics based on the *Logical Speaking Workbook*, which was used in my English Presentation class. The first three lessons tackle personal interests such as hobbies, where to visit, and future dreams. The remaining lessons thereafter introduce debatable issues such as free access to the Internet among children, whether to have pets, living in the city versus countryside, and so on. The

workbook provides a structural framework for speaking in three steps. First, take a stand by expressing “yes” or “no”. Second, give two reasons to support the opinion. Lastly, conclude the remark using a discourse marker such as “so” or “therefore”. Since the material matched the interests of the university students, this motivated them to express their opinions. Due to limitations such as the network on campus and availability of instructors, my students were asked to take online lessons outside of class, employing a flipped-classroom design.

Purpose of the Study

Since Japanese learners are generally hesitant toward speaking English, my lessons were planned using the *Logical Speaking* topics, utilizing the overseas remote lessons outside of class. I also used Hylable for group activities in class in order to have an objective understanding of communicative behaviors during the discussion. Thus, this study aims to: 1) discover how ICTs such as Hylable and *Logical Speaking* can contribute to Japanese learners’ improvement in speaking English; 2) compare the effects of using ICT with face-to-face communication in a real classroom; and 3) determine what combinations of activities (i.e., online/offline, inside/outside of class) would be effective in increasing the motivation and confidence of Japanese learners to speak English with ease.

Methodology

The participants were 24 university students enrolled in an English Presentation course (Intermediate) from Grades 1–4. Analyses were conducted only for students who consented for responses to be used. Classes were held once a week for 90 minutes over 15 weeks total (October 2023 to February 2024). Students were requested to take *Logical Speaking* remote lessons outside the class, but Lesson 1 was conducted remotely in class to ensure that the students were properly familiarized with the process. The Hylable system was first used in week 5 with the company support staff participating via Zoom. Weeks 14 and 15 were the end-of-term presentations, and thus no group or paired work was done.

The typical flow of the day from weeks 4 to 13 started with greetings, followed by mini speeches given in front of the class by a few students based on the personal topics of Units 1 to 3. Afterward, we proceeded with group work in preassigned groups of four, which was a review of the previous lesson (i.e., reflecting on the remote individual lesson they took before coming to class), and this activity was recorded using the Hylable system. The latter half of the class was allotted for circular paired work, wherein students can practice conversing to prepare for the next remote lesson. Students were paired, talked with their partner for 4–6 minutes, then moved to a new seat to talk to a new partner afterward. After class, students were expected to take a remote lesson based on what they practiced during paired work before the next class. During the next class, the final version of their speech on that topic would be shared during the Hylable group work.

Figure 1 shows the classroom arrangement for the group work using Hylable. Students are designated as A, B, C, or D to indicate their position in the Hylable recordings. The recording devices are represented by the red ovals in the middle of each group. The groupings were initially done randomly, but later on, students were grouped according to their skill level.

Figure 1: Hylable Group Work Arrangement

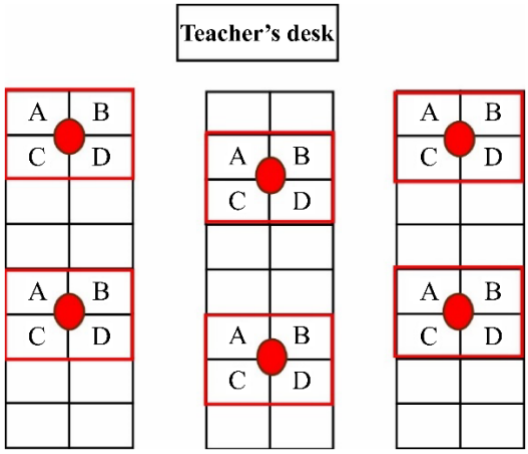
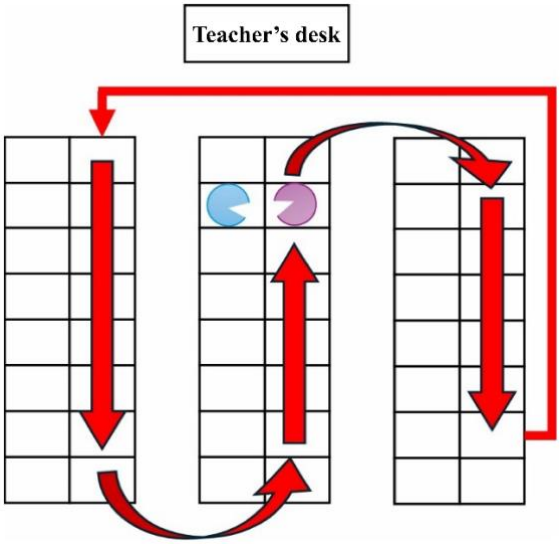


Figure 2 shows the classroom arrangement for the paired work. Students were initially paired based on their seats, and thus the activity always began by talking to their seatmates. After 4–6 minutes, students (represented by the purple icon) are signaled to move to the next seat, following the arrows indicated in the figure. The students talk to their new partners for 4–6 minutes, and the cycle is continued until the time is up for the activity. Occasionally, some time was allotted for the students to take notes on the expressions they used and/or they wanted to use for the next partner.

Figure 2: Circular Paired Work Arrangement



The effects of this teaching methodology were analyzed based on the end-of-term questionnaire results, which were part of the course requirements. There were two types of questionnaires on Google Forms, one for reflecting on the *Logical Speaking* remote lessons and another for the effectiveness paired and group activities, including the use of Hylable Discussion. The class included 24 students, but not all students completed the forms and/or consented to their data to be used in the analysis. The first and second questionnaires had a total of 20 and 17 valid responses, respectively.

Results

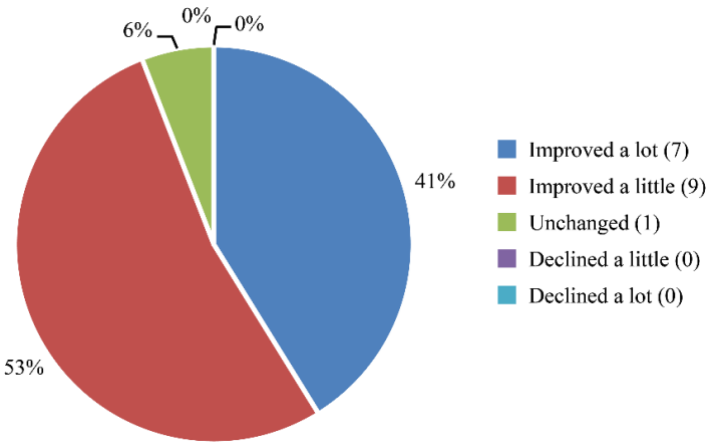
For the question "Do you feel that your English-speaking skill improved through the group and paired work activities in class?" (n = 17), 53% answered "Improved a little," while 41% answered "Improved a lot" among the 5 choices given (Figure 3).

The reasons for their positive responses are summarized as follows:

- Speaking based on preparation and review was not too difficult and felt safe.
- Topics beyond the daily conversation were sufficiently challenging and led to a fair amount of vocabulary growth.
- The friendly and acceptable atmosphere made us feel at ease to speak.
- There were ample opportunities for speaking and communicating with others.
- Our classmates who were proficient in speaking were helpful and supportive, serving as models for good English speakers.
- The reflection time given to help us find the expressions to use was effective.

One student who answered "unchanged" wrote, "I don't think my English speaking improved. However, I feel that the psychological barrier for speaking became weaker."

Figure 3: Self-Evaluation of Change in English-Speaking Skills



For the question "Do you feel that your English-speaking anxiety decreased through the group and paired work activities in class?" (n = 17), 59% answered "Decreased a lot," 23% answered "Unchanged," and 18% "Decreased a little" among the 5 choices given (Figure 4).

Those who answered "Decreased a lot" gave the following reasons:

- The class atmosphere was generally relaxing and supportive. I felt that making mistakes was allowed and well-accepted.
- We were able to adequately prepare for speaking because the topics were provided beforehand.
- My classmates' positive and active attitudes toward speaking stimulated my speaking behavior.

Those who answered "Decreased a little" gave the following reasons:

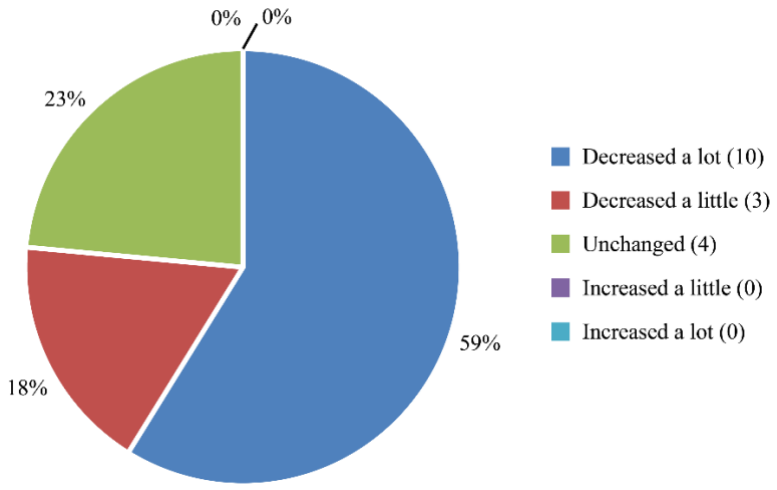
- There was lot of repetition during the activities, so it was easy to get accustomed to what to say.
- Lots of practice time for speaking was provided.

- Speaking with Japanese classmates was good, but the remote lessons with native speaker instructors provided good challenges.

The student who answered “Unchanged” responded:

- The answering pattern was too fixed, and I would prefer to speak more freely. I also needed more practice to further reduce the stress of speaking.

Figure 4: Self-Evaluation of Change in English-Speaking Anxiety



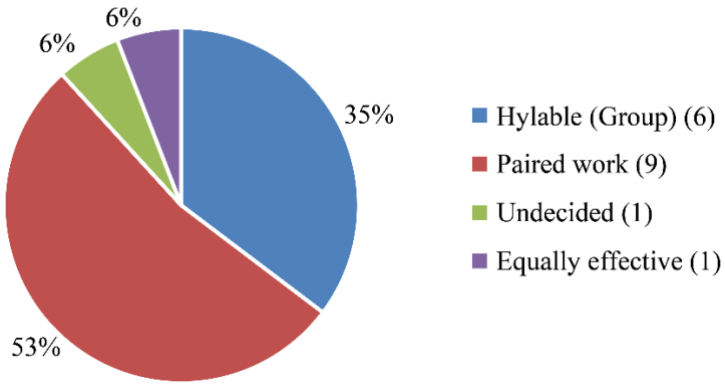
For the question “Which activity did you feel was more effective in improving your English-speaking skills, the group work with Hylable or the paired work?” (n = 17), 53% preferred the paired work, while 35% preferred the group work with Hylable. One person was undecided, while another said that both were equally effective (Figure 5).

The reasons for their preferences illustrated the advantages of both methodologies. In groups of four, students could listen to more opinions, and the discussion could develop more deeply. Additionally, when grouped by English proficiency levels, some students felt more relaxed to speak up. The awareness of being recorded and analyzed with Hylable also seemed to encourage group members to be more cooperative with each other. However, the paired work provided multiple opportunities to constantly interact with new partners, helping students refine their ideas and expressions as they went through multiple partners. The students were exposed to a wider variety of ideas, expressions, and pronunciations. The one-to-one setting also pressured students to speak. Compared to the group work, students felt that the paired work more closely simulated real communication.

When asked about the use of the Hylable system in class, the answers were generally positive. The respondents cited three advantages. First, the analyses of the Hylable system enhanced students’ self-awareness in communication. Second, the results of the analysis provided directions for changes and improvement, which enriched the group discussion. Third, because the results analyzed the entire group, it was possible to improve their own communication styles by learning from other members. However, one disadvantage was commonly cited by the students. Since the Hylable recorder detects the voice directions of each speaker to identify the group members, the recording must be done in a certain sitting arrangement. However, since the tables in the classroom were fixed, students had to be conscious about their facial directions while speaking. They felt that these physical restrictions were inconvenient. Another student commented that the use of artificial intelligence could help further improve the

analysis. Nevertheless, the participants were more positive toward the new technology and had less negative attitudes toward being recorded because the Hylable results provided visualization of the unconscious styles of participation.

Figure 5: Perceived Effectiveness for the Activity Types



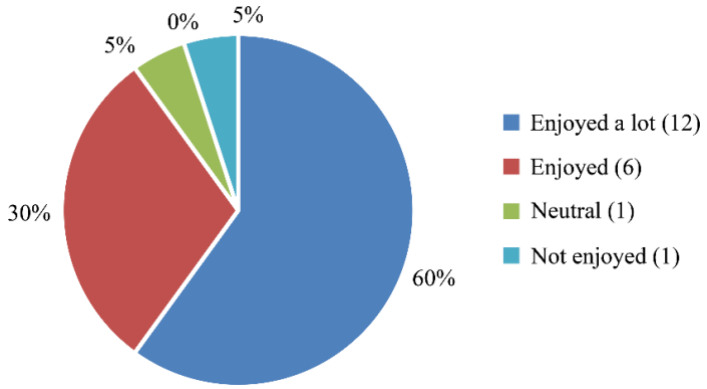
Lastly, for the question of "Did you enjoy the remote overseas lessons with *Logical Speaking*?" (n = 20), 60% said "Enjoyed a lot," while 30% answered "Enjoyed." One person was neutral, while another did not enjoy. This was based on 5 choices provided (Figure 6).

The reasons for their positive answers are summarized as follows:

- The native-speaking instructors from the Philippines showed positive, kind and friendly attitudes and were very supportive.
- Communicating with overseas foreigners was a new experience. Learning about the life and culture outside Japan was exciting.
- Communicating online caused less nervousness compared to face-to-face, in-person interactions.
- We are more used to English spoken by American and/or British native speakers. The English accents of the Philippine instructors were somewhat unfamiliar, but I enjoyed it.

The student who was neutral said, "I'm naturally shy and get nervous talking to strangers, but I was happy when I could get my message across to the instructor somehow." Interestingly, the comment of the student who did not enjoy was positive, written as "I rarely have a chance to talk with foreigners or try to actively communicate in English, so the experience was something different from my daily life. The small chats with the instructors were fun, and I could enjoy the online lessons." Thus, it was unclear why the student provided that answer.

Figure 6: Evaluation of Overseas Remote Online Lessons



Conclusion

Both the group and paired work had positive effects on students' perceived speaking improvement, but in different ways. The group work with the Hylable analyses helped the participants objectively understand their communication styles and compare themselves to other members. However, the paired work provided an environment wherein the students are exposed to a wider variety of opinions and expressions, allowing them to refine their speech by encountering different speakers. Therefore, having a variety of activities in class would be beneficial for students with diverse learning styles and characteristics.

The flow of having pre-remote lesson practice in class, followed by an overseas remote lesson outside of class, then by reviewing and reflecting in class seemed to work well. Japanese students, in particular, prefer to prepare first before speaking in English. Although this flow contained repetitive work, students were exposed to a wider vocabulary and expressions as they communicated with different people.

The use of Hylable, a device that analyzes communication, was appreciated by the students because it allows them to visualize their personal style of real-time communication. The circular paired work provided an opportunity for students to talk and share ideas in English with various classmates in a relaxed and efficient manner. The mandatory out-of-class remote lessons with overseas instructors additionally served as extra opportunities to communicate in English. The various native-speaker instructors who had a different style from American/British English, as well as the pressure for speaking in a one-to-one environment, encouraged students to try hard to get their messages across.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to acknowledge the Enago for editing this manuscript.

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