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Kurihara, N. (2006). Classroom anxiety: How does student attitude change in English oral communication class in a Japanese senior high school? *Accents Asia* [Online], 1 (1), 34-68. Available: <http://www.accentsasia.org/1-1/kurihara.pdf>

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## Classroom Anxiety: How Does Student Attitude Change in English Oral Communication Class in a Japanese Senior High School?

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### Introduction

The Course of Study established by the Ministry of Education and Science put into practice in 2003 directs teachers to focus on practical English communication skills as a general objective of English secondary education. More emphasis is now to be placed on oral communication skills than ever before. However, the students in my classes do not seem interested in acquiring the oral communication skills the Ministry recommends. Although my school is ranked highest in the southwest area of Hyogo Prefecture, and the students' academic achievement is exemplary, their attitude toward oral English activities is passive. They have learned a sufficient amount of vocabulary to communicate in English, but they are reluctant to use the language and do not seem to believe they can actually speak English. Students are generally quiet in class. Their attention is always on the teacher; in my class, students characteristically listen to me intently and carefully take notes when I write something on the blackboard. Students seldom answer when I ask them to speak in English, however. Instead, they look down at their notebooks or textbooks, avoiding eye-contact with me. This general attitude applies to the oral communication class, in addition to other classes. Previously, however hard I tried to get students to speak out in English, they remained silent. If our assistant English teacher or I said something funny, they laughed or smiled, but they rarely, if ever, spoke English voluntarily. Students spoke only when they



were called on to answer a question. I often wondered what was on their mind and how their attitudes could change.

As a teacher, my assumption had always been that the students were not accustomed to speaking in English, but if provided with constant opportunity, they would start. After several months of attempting to use only English in class, however, I found little change taking place. I used only simple English, explained new words by paraphrasing, and adopted as many gestures and visual aids as I could. Although the class style was still teacher-centered and a CD player was used as an audio aid, all instructions were given only in English and all explanations were made in English -- except on rare occasions when students showed total confusion or incomprehension. I continued to speak in English in the classroom, dealing with the materials for listening practice in the authorized textbook. However, the reaction of the students was not very different from that of the students in classes where I used Japanese for instructions and explanations. If I asked students even a simple question, no one volunteered to answer. The class remained silent and students spoke only when I chose someone to answer my question. Even though students responded, the utterances were typically limited to the set phrases, such as "I'm sorry, I have no idea." The environment of the English classroom itself seemed to give students pressure, preventing them from using their knowledge of the English language. I decided to do an experiment to determine whether the student attitudes would change in the oral communication classroom, and if so, what could be the key factors.

My experiment consisted of two parts. The first was to let students become involved in group talk, where each group member worked to understand a message from another member who presented a topic. The rule of this activity was that only English should be used. At first, the material for this activity was chosen by the students from magazine articles I provided. Later students were allowed to select magazines and books to talk about. Forming groups for the activity and having the choice of material were to see how group work influenced student attitudes, as well as student interest in their talk. The style of group formation was changed in the middle of the project to determine whether and how peer relationship affected student attitudes. The second part of the experiment was to let students



work in groups to create a performance of their choice, such as drama or speech. Watching the student reaction to being given freedom in the classroom learning condition, I tried to see how students' interest influenced their attitudes in oral communication activities.

Since my school is strongly entrance exam-oriented, there is a tendency for both teachers and students to look at the classroom as a place to hone test-taking skills but little else. English oral communication class is no exception. In each school term, there is a listening test similar to the entrance exams and the procedure is strictly set. This means less time for unique projects in the classroom. I tried hard to spend as much time as possible looking for differences in students' attitudes through this project. Even though student tendency to focus on entrance exams continues, if student anxiety in the oral communication classroom is lessened, they will talk more in the activities and thus improve their practical English communication skills.

In this project I was particularly interested in anxiety that might hinder student spontaneous speech. I tried to find what factors encourage students to talk more in the classroom. I examined mainly group work, peer choice, and materials of interest. I employed questionnaires both at the beginning and end of the project. I tried to examine student attitude change by observing students in class and letting students keep a group journal as well as by interviewing with volunteer students. Student attitudes changed dramatically at the end of the project. In this paper I argue that relationships among peers affect student attitudes in the classroom in a subtle way, as well as the style the students work in. The careful choice of the materials, considering the level and interest of the students, are also important factors in reducing classroom anxiety.

### **Literature Review**

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (1998) announced a National Curriculum Standards Reform making a foreign language a required subject. The document states "Great emphasis will be placed on the practice in the situations where the target language is actually used" (p.14). The Ministry (2002) also proposed a "strategic plan to cultivate 'Japanese with English abilities'," with its target in senior high school



English education for students to be able to “hold normal conversations (and a similar level of reading and writing) on every day topics” (p.2). Speaking and listening skill development is of greater concern than ever.

*Japanese Student Reticence to Speak in the Classroom*

The Ministry’s strategic plan intends to increase learners’ opportunities to speak English in cooperation with English teaching facilities such as private supplementary schools, and to encourage learners to study abroad. However, many practitioners and researchers report Japanese student’s reluctance to speak in school classrooms, where language learning is generally teacher-centered. Both teachers and students found student reticence problematic in class (Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001). Anderson (1993) points out Japanese students have a tendency to remain silent in the classroom unless called upon or provided with clear-cut answers. It is often argued that Japanese students’ formal reserved attitudes are cultural traits fostered in the high school context (Barnland, 1975; Condon, 1984; Anderson, 1993; Rohlen, 1983).

Researchers have also examined Japanese students’ attitudes in EFL contexts (Shimizu, 1995; Koizumi & Matsumoto, 1993; Servetter, 1999). Long and Russell (1999), Christensen (1989), and Miller (1995) specifically noted Japanese students’ attitudinal change. Both Long and Russell (1999) and Christensen (1989) investigated student attitudinal change between two English learning environments, high school and college. Long and Russell (1999) found that the current student attitudes do not reflect their past experience. Long and Russell (1999) also pointed out that students expect teacher enthusiasm as well as ability to create an environment effectively for students to speak in the classroom. Miller (1995), in a survey of college EFL classes, compared student attitudes toward communicative instruction given by a native English speaker, and traditional teacher-centered instruction given by Japanese teachers. Results revealed that students’ silent reaction in classroom interaction activities was predominantly due to inner tension caused by the fear of failure to convey a message. In this study, student attitudinal and behavioral change proved to be largely influenced by the teacher attitudes. One clear indication of Miller’s study (1995) is the significance of Western instructors’



accommodating attitudes toward culturally different learners. Although the participants were already highly motivated college students with comparatively high English proficiency, in a small class size, Miller's findings (1995) are useful not only for Western instructors but for Japanese teachers in that they argue for the significance of teacher attitudes. In terms of accommodating attitudes of the teachers, as Miller suggests (1995), more studies from the Japanese teacher's perspective as well are expected in communication classes.

#### *Language Learner Attitude and Attitudinal Change*

Although studies on attitudes and motivation are well documented by researchers (Dörnyei, 2001), the definition of 'attitudes' seems to remain varied. Campbell (1963) perceived attitudes to be evaluative tendencies as acquired behavioral dispositions, and Fishbein and Aizen (1975) defined attitude as a learned predisposition. Gardner, Tremblay and Masgoret (1997) found a link between affective measures and achievement, by examining correlations of attitudes, motivations, and other variables with achievement. Widdows and Voller (1991) invented a survey (PANSI) in order to understand student attitudes and needs. Eagly and Chaikien (1989) regard attitudes as outcomes of categorizing processes of learner's predispositions. Long and Russell (1999) define attitudes as "a means of adjusting to and changing one's social environment"(p.19). Thus, attitudes are defined in various ways, but an important aspect is stressed by Potter and Wetherell (1987), who point out that attitudes are subject to change. We can, therefore, expect attitudinal change in the learning environment.

#### *Language Learner Attitude and Anxiety*

Anxiety is one of the factors that determine attitude in the foreign language classroom. Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels (1994) found that anxiety is a major contributing factor in determining attitude and motivation towards learning a second language. In attitudinal changes in language learning, then, anxiety and the variables that influence the level of anxiety need to be examined. Trylong (1987) concluded that aptitude, attitude and anxiety



“interact in unique and powerful ways as they relate to achievement” (p.65). Campbell and Orwitz (1991) estimate up to one half of all language students experience debilitating levels of language anxiety. In the language learning environment, controlling student anxiety level seems to be the key to changing student achievement. Horwitz, et al. (1986) state that there are three components of foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension, fear of negative social evaluation, and test anxiety. As test anxiety is treated differently when dealing with oral communication, the other two components can be focused on in examining the attitudes in English oral communication classroom. Endler (1980) explains multidimensional view of anxiety as individual and contextual, stating that anxiety is produced in the interaction between the person and the situation. This also supports focusing on the social element in treating the anxiety. Tsui (1996) conducted a qualitative study of reluctance in Hong Kong EFL classes, searching for how language learning anxiety impeded Chinese students in classroom interaction. Anxiety was produced by fear of negative peer reaction. Tsui (1996) recommends several teacher classroom strategies to lessen anxiety. Although the cause of Chinese student fear in Tsui’s study (1996) seems mostly culture-based, the suggestions are also useful for Japanese classrooms.

#### *Peer Relationship and Group Work*

Kondo and Ling (2004) grouped the strategies used by Japanese college students to cope with anxiety in English language classrooms into five categories: preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, resignation, and peer seeking. In this study, peer seeking means finding someone whose achievement is as unsatisfactory as one’s own, so that the learner can share the miserable feelings caused by failure. The peer role here seems to be passive. However, peers more often seem to have a greater influence in the language learning classroom.

Peers in foreign language learning play a complicated role. Potter and Wetherell (1987) conclude that individual’s attitudes can change drastically through social pressure from peers in a classroom discussion. Dörnyei (1998b) illustrates the case where attitudes of group members are regarded as one of the demotive factors in a classroom, and Leki (2001) points out that group work sometimes has negative consequences. On the other hand,



benefits of positive group atmosphere (Hadfield, 1992) and of group cohesiveness (Galley et al., 1995; Mullen & Copper, 1994) have also been pointed out. Based on the argument of Japanese learner's cultural traits (Lebra, 1976), Mutch (1995) recommends intimate tasks in a classroom for learners to feel more relaxed and behave more spontaneously because a closer relationship between learners will help them to attempt English. After researching Japanese learner beliefs, Matsuura, Chiba, and Hilderbrandt (2001), conclude that "group work and paired activities are appropriate for Japanese students" (p.79). Servetter (1999) points out the positive effect of group work on Japanese learners, with increased motivation, achievement, and desire to support peers. Thus group work in the learning environment, as well as learners' relationships between peers, affect learner attitude in the classroom.

#### *Choice of Materials*

Dörnyei (2001) writes that the "course book" is one of the most demotivating factors in a classroom. In his study, learners chose the course book as one of the factors that discouraged them from learning. Mutch (1995) also points out the importance of careful choice of materials and tasks in learner motivation and attitudinal change in the EFL classroom. Matsuura, Chiba, and Hilderbrandt (2001) suggest that student's level of English ability should be prioritized in selecting materials. The effect of instruction based on learner aptitudes, interests, abilities, and preferred learning styles is reported by researchers (Rost, 2002). Choice of materials also plays an important role in student attitudinal change.

Ely (1986) points out that a psychologically comfortable and safe learning environment is important. Teacher attitudes in EFL classroom affect student attitudes in the classroom, and teachers play an important role to change student attitudes and behavior to be more motivated (Dörnyei, 2001; Mutch, 1995; Miller, 1995).

Researchers attribute Japanese students' reticent attitudes in the language learning classroom to cultural traits or teacher influence. It is also observed that language learner attitudes change. Researchers regard anxiety as one of the major determiners of these attitudes. Studies on anxiety also have ascertained its social aspect. It is argued that social



elements such as peer relationships and teachers' attitude, as well as choice of learning materials are the key elements in attitudinal change in the language learning classroom.

### **Methodology**

In this project I investigated student attitudes toward the English oral communication classroom. First, I used questionnaires to get an idea of student goals and expectations. I then adopted two main activities, where students had the freedom to choose their learning materials. Both activities were conducted in groups, a style which students had never experienced. I asked students to keep a journal in both in English and Japanese in each group for reflection of their activities. At the end of the project, I distributed another set of questionnaires to discover what change students had undergone through the activities. Interviews with volunteers followed the questionnaires, with the goal of ascertaining student perceptions of the attitude changes. I also kept a journal of my observations of the activities. Both sets of questionnaires and the interviews were conducted in Japanese. I wrote my journal in English.

### *Participants and their background*

The participants were a class of 38 girls in the second year of the academically-oriented senior high school. In terms of test scores, the school was ranked as the highest in the southwest Hyogo. More than 95% of its graduates go on to university or college each year. Approximately half of the students go to national or municipal universities, and the rest go to prestigious private universities. As a result of the emphasis on entrance exam success, student interests and efforts are often focused on techniques for test-taking. Teachers, too, place a great deal of emphasis on success on entrance exams.

### *Research question*

I had three research questions. How did student attitudes change in one high school English oral communication class, where students were reticent in the activities? What hindered





their spoken performance? How could I eliminate the restricting factors to encourage students to speak more in the classroom?

### *Data collection*

The data for this project consisted of questionnaires conducted at both the beginning and end of the project as well as student journals written immediately after the group activity, my own field notes taken while observing students in class, and interviews with student volunteers carried out at the end of the project.

The questionnaires that I administered at the beginning of the project dealt with students' goal awareness in English learning as well as their expectations of the oral communication class, as measured on an eight degree Likert scale. I asked about student expectations of the proficiency level they aimed for in the English oral communication class as well as their perception of their present proficiency level. I also asked for both student ideas about the most effective ways and their actual practice to improve oral communication skills in the classroom (See Appendix A for details). While the first questionnaire was partly for the purpose of raising learner awareness and consisted mostly of closed questions, the second set of questionnaires consisted of open-ended questions, such as "When do you find it easiest to speak in English in the classroom?" I asked about the difficult times as well, and about the reasons (Appendix B). The interview questions were also open-ended with the intention of exploring student attitudes and perceptions, with a focus on the reluctance to speak in English. The main questions were concerned with reactions to group talk activities and the presentation project. I wanted to examine how student react to the freedom of choice in materials as well as how their relationships with peers affect their attitudes toward the activities (Appendix C).

### *Group Talk*

I examined the change in student attitudes, by adopting a new style of class activity. Before I introduced this activity, I taught one of the two class periods of English oral communication with an assistant language teacher (ALT) every week. Most activities there



were task-based pair work, following the conversation textbook. In the other class period I taught alone, I used a textbook based on listening practice for university entrance exams. I inserted the new system into both two different styles of class. I call this Group Talk. Group Talk was a system where I encouraged students to communicate in English through a topic of their choice and to share their ideas among group members first, then with the whole class. I examined group formation as well as other influences on students' attitudes in the classroom.

First, I organized groups by name order. Each group was made up of four or five members. There were three different assigned roles: presenter, reporter and listener. Before the class, the presenter was assigned to choose an article from an English magazine. She also prepared three short quizzes on the content with answer keys and definitions of difficult or unfamiliar words. In the class activity, the other members (listeners and reporters) asked as many questions as possible, while the presenter read the article aloud. The presenter stopped reading to answer questions from other members. When she finished, it was her turn to quiz the other members, who tried to answer her questions. Communication had to be done only in English. Time for reflection followed this ten minute activity and the members filled in journal sheets, keeping records of who had asked how many questions, what was the main idea of the article, and how well their communication had proceeded (Appendix D). The reporter from each group then reported what the group had learned, to the whole class. If there were no questions from students in other groups, the ALT or I asked each group several questions. The reporters were thus given an opportunity to respond quickly in English in front of the whole class. Students changed roles each period. When everyone had experienced each role, they formed new groups a second time, according to their choice.

In this group talk activity, during the first five periods, presenters chose articles from several different issues of the English magazine *TIME*, which I prepared. The length of articles was roughly between ten and twenty lines. I provided articles that contained difficult words, so that many questions from listeners would arise. In the next stage (after five periods), I provided a much wider range of choices with regards to the level and the



content of articles, from several different magazines and story books in English. To examine student attitude change, I focused my attention on student journals of the first, the middle and the final class periods of this activity. A comparison of the journal contents of the first period and the middle period showed student attitude change toward the group work, and a comparison between two different group formation in the middle periods showed an attitude change concerning peer relationships. The different attitude in the middle and the final periods showed the influence of interest in the material since students got a wider range of material choice after the middle period.

### *Presentation Project*

After nine periods of group talk activity, I organized students to do a performance in which they would present a speech or a drama. Each group turned in a practice plan as well as a self-assessment system. They spent the following four periods preparing for the presentation, which included drama or speech. The focus here was on student reaction to a wide choice of materials in the process, which showed how student interest in the materials influenced their attitude in the activity.

In this project, I followed “content analysis” (Leki, 2001), of interviews, open-ended and closed-ended questionnaires, journals of students’ reflection in class, and my own observations. Although my main focus was on anxiety, I also examined factors that appeared frequently. For example, in response to a question about the reason for their discomfort in speaking English in the classroom, many different answers arose. I categorized them into several groups, each of which contained the same factor. After getting a general idea about student attitude through analyzing the questionnaires, I examined how these factors were mentioned in the interviews. The interviewees’ reflections on class activities gave detailed accounts of their thoughts and feelings on each factor. I then looked through the student journals and my own observation journal to examine how they supported the interviewees’ accounts. I thus synthesized the factors and tried to find relationships as well as overall meanings, which explained students’ reticent attitudes in the classroom.



## **Findings**

Students expected improvement in their practical English speaking skills from the oral communication class. They also developed ideas about how to improve their skills through the oral communication class. However, many students didn't use what they believed was the most effective way to improve their skills. For example, students avoided speaking English as much as possible, despite their belief that it would help them. The pressure in the classroom was affected by a complicated relationship between peers. Students feared making mistakes and that hindered them from speaking in English in the classroom.

### *Student expectation of English oral communication class*

In general, students' goals in the English oral communication class seemed more practical than mere success on the entrance exams. More than half of the students said they aimed at "everyday conversation" skills and more than a third of the students said they wanted to acquire speaking skills for "shopping and traveling." Most students revealed an expectation to improve their skills by two ranks higher than the present skill level, in response to a question about their perception of the present proficiency level and expectation of improved proficiency level. Students' generally passive attitude in classroom, then, was not caused by their lack of expectation of the class and themselves (See Figure 1).

I found an interesting contrast between student beliefs and practices. When I asked about their perception of the most effective ways to improve English oral communication skills in the classroom, about 77% of the students answered that making an effort to speak as much English as possible was the most effective. However, only 10% of the students said they actually tried to speak English in class. In other words, students found it hard to practice their beliefs in the classroom. Also, among students who said engagement in English oral activities was the most effective way to improve their skills, less than half practiced this belief. Something seemed to block students from doing what they believed was helpful for their improvement. On the other hand, 92% of the students said they carefully listened to the teacher in the classroom, yet less than half of the students thought



of this strategy as the most effective to improve their English communication skills. No one chose careful note taking as an effective strategy, but 21% took notes in the classroom (See Figure 2). Students were doing what they didn't believe was the effective way to improve their skills. Students wanted to improve their skills and had ideas of what to do. They wanted to speak in English as much as possible in the classroom, but they couldn't or didn't actually speak. Something seemed to prevent students from carrying out their beliefs in the classroom.

### *Student Preference of Activities*

Student preference of group activities revealed factors that kept them from speaking English as much as possible in the classroom. On the questionnaire at the end of the term, two thirds of the students ranked group work activities as their number one choice (See Table 1). I asked, "Which activity did you find the most interesting and fun?" Students ranked *practice with ALT*, *group talk*, *presentation project*, and *listening exercise with CD* according to their enjoyment. Both *group talk* and *presentation project* contained group work. The *practice with ALT* consisted mainly of pair work. *Listening exercise* was a whole class activity. Although students adored their young and handsome ALT, apparently most students found group work activities more interesting than pair work and other activities. In the questionnaire, students who chose *presentation project* or *group talk* referred to group work as the most enjoyable factor. Thirteen students said, "We enjoyed learning and working in cooperation." Others pointed out, "Group work made activities fun and interesting."

Most students said they found it more comfortable and easy to learn when working in small groups because they didn't have to worry about making mistakes or errors. In the open-ended questionnaire, for example, those students who chose group activities as the best opportunity to speak in English in the classroom, wrote the reason, "Even if I make a mistake, my friends (members in the same group) understand me and we can laugh at it." Others also wrote, "I don't suffer any anxiety in group activities." Small group activities made it easy for students to speak in English in the classroom.



*Whole Class Activities—Fear of Losing Face*

Students revealed that they were afraid of making mistakes in front of the whole class. On the questionnaire, about two thirds of the students said that they found it extremely difficult to speak in English in front of the whole class. Six students mentioned a “fear of making mistakes” while 16 stressed “tension” or “nervousness.” Whole class activities made students keenly aware of the significance of giving a correct answer. Even though the class was composed of people whom they already knew very well, when faced with the opportunity to speak alone in front of their peers, students said that they suddenly felt as if they were examinees being tested by the others. <sup>1</sup> Fuyumi, a thoughtful student with general high academic achievement, explained the feeling in terms of self-consciousness and embarrassment. She said, “Being looked at by all the other classmates makes me feel nervous.” Michiko, whose academic achievement in English was also high, explained the feeling, “My mind stops functioning when I worry about being chosen by the teacher in whole class activities. I can’t answer a question I normally would be able to answer if I were not in this panic.”

Students clearly feared classmates’ evaluation. They hated to consider the possibility that everyone but them knew something important. They didn’t want to lose face. In the interview, Mutsumi, a bright but shy student, said, “The teachers’ reaction does not make me feel small because it’s natural that they know more. However, if my ignorance of some common knowledge is revealed in front of the whole class, I feel ashamed. I feel like a fool.” The fear is strong. Student comments suggested that even one mistake in front of the whole class would discourage students so much that they would become demoralized about learning. As Takae, an outspoken student of average achievement said in the interview, “If I make a mistake in the whole class activity, I would never feel like speaking again.”

Interestingly, students were not afraid of being laughed at in front of the whole class. To them laughter wasn’t insulting but rather reflected compassion and sympathy. The fear was silence, which they said meant either insult or coldness. Machiko, in the interview, described this silence as *shirakeru* which means a reaction caused by disappointment or



boredom. Chie, a cheerful student of average achievement, said in the interview, “I don’t care about being laughed at when I make a mistake, but I dread the silent reaction of the whole class.” On this point, the other interviewees expressed agreement.

The peer unit as a whole thus worked to put each student in the spotlight in the classroom. Peer reaction, however, changed depending on the situation. Students recognized others’ difficulty of reacting to the speaker in whole class activities. For example, Machiko said in the interview, “The same classmate who reacts to my mistake in a friendly way in small group activities, will keep silent in the whole class activities.” The style or the condition of how students are situated in class has a significant effect on their anxiety.

#### *Difficulty of the material*

The tension in whole class activities seemed to be caused in part by the gap between the high expectations of students and the difficulty of the material. Students were also reluctant to make mistakes because they had been treated as “good students” for years, which reinforced their fear of losing face. Yet they were willing to show off their achievements to prove their intelligence. While successful in junior high school, high school classes were more difficult for students to deal with and maintain a positive attitude. Quizzes from the teacher in class were not always easy. Students were no longer certain whether they had the correct answer.

In the interview, all but one student confessed that they didn’t usually feel uneasy in whole class activities in junior high school. At that time they were eager to speak in front of peers. Chie said in the interview, “I used to volunteer to speak out in class in junior high school. The quizzes were so easy that I was certain I knew the correct answer.” There was no fear of losing face and they were able to speak voluntarily in front of the whole class. In high school, the content of the textbook had become more difficult and teachers’ quizzes harder to tackle, with far more risks of losing face if they volunteered to speak. The drive to participate in class activities inevitably shrunk. Chie said, “The school (class) is choking me.” Michiko, referring to the class in general, made a similar comment. She said “This



content is too difficult.” The sudden change of the required level made students feel stressed and tense in the classroom.

The difficulty of the material affected student attitude in group activities as well. Students found it difficult to engage themselves in the task when the level of the material was too difficult. At the beginning of the group talk activity, students showed a great deal of confusion, which was apparently caused by the unfamiliarity about the activity itself and the choice of materials. However, as they became more accustomed to what to do and more careful about choosing their materials, students became more relaxed and involved in the activity. Students wrote in the group journal, “There were so many difficult words that we found the activity hard. Though the speaker had prepared a lot, there was still confusion.” Even though the assignment was mainly to ask and answer questions about short articles of ten or more lines, students became stuck, depending on the material. When they chose articles more carefully, though, their attitudes became active. Kumi said in the interview, “My group was engaged in the activity with much more ease and interest when we talked about an article of a familiar topic.” Also one group wrote in their journal when they dealt with an article about a popular movie, “Today’s topic was easy to understand. We were able to ask many questions.” Student involvement in the activity depended on the level of their materials.

#### *Materials of Learner Interest*

Students also found significance in selecting their own material for the presentation project. In the questionnaire, more than two thirds of the students chose this assignment as the most enjoyable activity. The style of small groups and the freedom to choose material seemed to make students think highly of the activity. Questionnaire comments often included such words as “freedom,” “creative,” and “own ideas,” factors that students thought made the activity interesting. Before I started this project, students had been simply provided with the material to learn in class. They were often obliged to struggle to understand the difficult materials, which led to a great deal of stress as well as loss of confidence in the subject matter. Students often became nervous and reluctant to show their ideas. In the presentation





assignment, however, students had the opportunity to set their own goals as well as chose their own materials. They were able to select what to learn according to their interests and needs.

Some students answered in the questionnaire, “I enjoyed the ‘presentation project’ because we had the freedom to create and adopt our own ideas. I became more positive and willing in the activity.” Others said, “It was easy to speak my opinions and ideas. This project was interesting.”

In this activity, students seemed to work positively, free from anxiety. They realized learning was more effective when they enjoyed it. One interviewee said, “We never forget fun experiences. We learn a lot from what we find fun and interesting.” Another girl said, referring to the outcome of the project work, “Even though I don’t feel a strong sense of achievement, I’m sure knowledge and skills were acquired through this activity without my consciousness.” The data suggest that when the material is right in terms of level and content, as well as student interest, learning becomes more fruitful and more efficient.

It was clear that the choice of materials was one of the keys to a positive attitude toward speaking in English in group work as well. In the fifth class period after students had started the activity, when they became more careful about choosing articles, students in one group wrote in their journal, “It has become easier and easier to understand the content of the article through the activity. We are happy. We want to do better next time.” When they got an even wider variety of books and magazines, such as teen magazines or a volume of *Harry Potter*, students’ attitudes became even more positive. One group wrote in their journal then, “Today’s article was very easy to read. We asked and answered many questions.” Also in the interview one student concluded, “When we had a choice from the various materials, we felt it more comfortable to engage in the activity.” Students knew what they were interested in as well as what they could understand without much difficulty. Their freedom of choice made it possible for them to deal with materials which are right in terms of level and content as well as their interest. Materials affect student attitudes in the activities.



*Peer Relationships in Small Group Activities*

Group talk activity also revealed how peer relationships in each group affected student attitudes. When this small group activity started, groups were formed by name order. After each member served in the role of speaker and reporter, groups were formed according to student preference. The effect was remarkable. The activity became much more lively. In my journal I described the active English communication conducted by the students as “a dramatic change.” I wrote at the time: “The moment the activity started, laughter and excitement filled the classroom. The words spoken were not in a complete sentence style... but actually they were actively speaking in English.”

Students seemed to feel more relaxed with friends than an ordinary mix of classmates. They were more secure, and less worried about making mistakes because they knew their friends understood them and tried to be helpful in learning together. Students pointed out in the interview, the difference in their anxiety level in the small group activities. Machiko said, “If my peers in the same group are all quiet, I feel nervous. If the peers are those I know well, I can speak in English more.” Yui, whose speaking proficiency was relatively high, was worried about peer reaction, saying, “If my peers remain silent when I speak in English, I feel embarrassed as well as discouraged.” Mutsumi, who was apparently shy in Japanese communication, also said, “I was able to ask questions in English when my familiar classmates were in the same group.” Peer relationships clearly influenced student attitude in class activities.

*Peer Support in the Whole Class Activity*

Although most students showed a preference for group work in the classroom with regard to interest and level of difficulty, one student chose the group talk activity as her favorite activity. The reason seemed to be that the group talk activity is comprised not only of talking in groups but also a whole class activity, as the questionnaire showed the majority of the students considered it most difficult to speak in front of the whole class. Students generally felt more secure and relaxed when talking with peers in small groups, but they had to go through stress and pressure when they took the role of reporter. The reporters, as



representatives of each group, made a summary of their group talks as well as asked or answered questions from other groups in front of the whole class. In the interview Fuyumi explained her experience as a reporter, saying “At first, I found it extremely difficult to put my thoughts into English sentences. I was almost in a panic.”

Student attitudes, however, changed gradually through the group activity conducted every class period. Especially after forming new groups, student engagement in the group activity became more active. The feelings of peer support were strengthened through the activities, and became strong enough to affect the whole class activity. Kayo, a quiet but emotionally stable student, said in the interview, referring to the reporting stage of group talk in the whole class: “In the beginning, I felt nervous and at a loss what to say, but by the end of the term, it became easy to speak. I actually found it fun.”

Takae explained a similar change, saying, “Speaking in front of the whole class became easy, because I was aware of my group members support from behind. I was not alone.” Group work fostered this secure feeling which developed even in the whole class activity. Group journals on the final day of the activity were full of excited comments about their achievement. One student said, “The content of the story was easy to understand. The speaker used gestures and it was fun to listen to her. Our group was able to ask two questions in the whole class activity! This is great!”

My own journal also noted the active involvement of the students in the whole class activity after the group talk, referring to the four groups which volunteered to ask questions. Peers in the same group influence each other in various ways.

## **Discussion**

Students’ quiet attitude was mainly caused by the fear of losing face in front of the whole class. Ironically, their background as “good students” worked to press them to maintain that status. They knew it’s hard for them to remain the best students in high school, but they couldn’t allow themselves either to lose face in front of the whole class, by making mistakes. Although I was not unaware of students’ tension caused by this fear before starting this project, I attributed it more to teacher influence than peer reaction. However,



the results of this project show that students were less concerned with teacher evaluation than peer evaluation. In class activities, speaking in front of the whole class meant becoming an examinee tested by other students. If they made a mistake, the silent reaction of their fellow students so threatened to damage their ego that they would not try the same risk again. Teacher encouragement didn't seem to have much of an effect.

In general, group work seemed to lessen this tension, and students were more relaxed and actively engaged in group-based speaking activities. Small groups seemed to allow students to deal with mistakes more easily. The physical closeness in the activities enabled students to respond to each other's mistake in a friendlier way; not with silence but with laughter. In small group activities peers were no longer strangers, though they still were in the whole class activities.

Peer relations were apparently the key to active engagement even in small group activities. Students suffered anxiety even in small group activities depending on the relationship between peers. Although the relationship could be improved in the process of the activities, it seemed better for students to have a choice of peers in the same group. I expected this tendency to some extent, but the results revealed such a profound influence of peer relationships that I have had to recognize its centrality.

The level and interest of the material in class was also significant. Student involvement in activities became more intense as they became more accustomed to choosing materials. When students dealt with materials chosen according to their interest, their attitude became even more lively. Before this project, I had just provided materials, which were often difficult to deal with. I directed them to do what the textbooks suggested. Students spoke as little as possible, no more than the textbook directed. However, students started to speak more, with materials of their own choosing, which they knew were not too difficult and of their interest.

Students' fear of losing face was also caused by the gap between their perception of their ability and textbook requirements. Students didn't find the textbook activities fun, either. Their interests were not reflected in textbook exercises, which seemed to hinder students' active involvement in class activities.



Before starting this project, I thought students' quiet attitudes in the classroom meant nothing but excessive concern with the entrance exams. My assumption was that students' concentration on class materials took the form of silence. I thought students believed the silent concentration was the best way to prepare for the entrance exams. However, I have found that students are eager to improve their English oral communication skills by actively speaking in class. As my results show, students wanted to speak English in the classroom, even though they mainly "listened to the teacher" and "took notes carefully." I am encouraged to know students hold different expectations of English oral communication class. More importantly, I feel keenly aware of my responsibility to help foster this attitude.

The results of my project reveal how much peer-relationships mean in classroom activities. They also show the importance of the adequacy and appropriateness of class materials. Student attitudes changed according to this consideration. I have always sought better teaching methods; How to teach and what to teach. Formerly, however, my thinking was always based on a teacher's view-point, which proved, I now realize, to be one-sided. What is more, students care little about teacher influence in the classroom although students have been subjected to teacher-centered classrooms for a long time. Through this project I actually discovered that students are more concerned about their peers and materials. By choosing their peers and materials themselves, students improved their learning attitude. The elements of choice and decision have enabled students to become more active speakers in the classroom. This capacity to control one's own learning is how Benson (2001) defines autonomy. Benson (2001) states that autonomous learning is "a mode of learning, and educational practices designed to foster autonomy"(p.110). Student attitudes changed in this project through the fostering of autonomy. This being the case, what I can do as a teacher is provide an environment where students have such choices, and to help them choose what they need and who they want to work with.

This project has taught me the real meaning of student-centeredness in oral communication class. The teachers' role as moderator means a great deal in this respect. Rogers (1983) suggests the importance of the teachers' role as "facilitator," who tries to create a psychological climate where students feel free to learn without fear of making



mistakes. In the future, I am determined to present a better learning environment so that students can practice what they believe is effective to improve their speaking skills -- to speak English more actively in the classroom.



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Appendix A

Questionnaire

1. How much do you expect to improve your English oral communication skills in this class? Please circle one of the following.

- everyday conversation (greeting, talking about weather)
- conversation for shopping or traveling
- conversation at work, with Native English speaking people
- success in entrance exams
- professional interpreter level

2. Please rate your English oral communication skills.

Circle the adequate number with 0 as no skills, 8 as your goal level.

1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8

3. How much do you think you can improve your English oral communication skills through this class? Please circle the adequate number, with 8 as your goal level.

1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8

4. What do you think is the most effective way to improve your English oral communication skills in classroom? Please pick up the best two and circle them.

- To be engaged in English oral activities intently
- To try speaking in English as often as possible
- To try listening to the teacher as carefully as possible
- To learn as many English words and phrases as possible
- To take note neatly
- Others (                            )(                            )(                            )

5. What do you actually do in this class, in order to improve your English oral communication skills? Please circle every item you practice.

- To be engaged in English oral activities intently
- To try to speak in English as often as possible
- To try to listen to the teacher as carefully as possible
- To learn as many English words and phrases as possible



- To take note neatly
- Others (                      ) (                      ) (                      )

6. What do you believe is the most effective practice outside class to improve your English oral communication skills? Please circle the top three.

- To review the class.
- To practice with the friends the expressions you have learned in class.
- To memorize the expressions.
- To try to listen and watch English programs.
- To use materials of English oral communication, such as CDs or videos .
- To go to English conversation school.
- To travel abroad.
- To study abroad.
- Others (                      ) (                      ) (                      )

7. What do you actually do outside class to improve your English oral communication skills? Circle every item you practice.

- To review the class.
- To practice with the friends the expressions you have learned in class.
- To memorize the expressions.
- To try to listen and watch English programs.
- To use materials of English oral communication, such as CDs or videos .
- To go to English conversation school.
- To travel abroad.
- To study abroad.
- Others (                      ) (                      ) (                      )

8. How much do you think you can improve your English oral communication skills by changing your current practices? Please circle the adequate number, with 1 as no improvement, and 8 as the maximum improvement.

1          2          3          4          5          6          7          8



Appendix B  
Questionnaire

① What did you enjoy most among the activities in oral communication class?

Please name the best three with the top as first.

(among: listening exercise with the tape, practice with ALT, talk about a topic activity, presentation project)

What do you think are the factors that made the activity enjoyable?

② What was least enjoyable factor about your least favorite activity?

What do you think are the factors that made the activity least enjoyable?

③ When do you think is the most comfortable situation to speak in English in classrooms?

What do you think makes you feel comfortable?

④ When do you think is the most uncomfortable situation to speak in English in classrooms?

What do you think makes you feel uncomfortable?

⑤ Do you think you find it easier to speak out now than before?

Why do you think so? (What do you think helped you, if you think you improved?)

⑥ What do you want to do more to improve your English oral communication skills?

⑦ Do you have any suggestions for improving this class?



Appendix C  
Interview Questions

1. What do you think of the activity “Group Talk” that you started in the third term?
2. What was your reaction when you were allowed to choose your fellow members to form a group? (compared with the other way of forming groups)
3. Have you got accustomed to ‘asking and answering’ task that was required during the ‘talk about a topic’ activity? Are you better at listening for information than before you started this activity?
4. As for “Group Talk” activity, at first you only chose an article from among the ones the teacher presented before you. In the next round, you chose a magazine from among those the teacher offered so that you can choose any topic from any magazine of your choice. then the next round allowed you to choose from anything, not only from the materials such as magazines or books the teacher presented, but also from the library or your own home. Which way did you like most? and why?
5. What did you think of the presentation task and its preparation?  
What was the good point for you?  
What was the bad point for you?
6. What do you think of the group project that you were engaged in (for the presentation of a short drama or speech) compared with the traditional (regular) style of class?
7. If you have a chance to do some project work, which would you prefer, to work in a group or individually? And why?
8. What do you think is important if you try to improve your English skills in class?
9. Are you now more motivated to improve your English speaking skills than before?



Appendix D  
Group journal sheet:

<b><i>GROUP JOURNAL</i></b>	
Date: /	
activity:(talk, role play, game, presentation, etc )	
Names of members/	frequency of questions
*	/
*	/
*	/
*	/
Question type:	frequency:
What.....:	..... times
Who.....:	.....times
When.....:	.....times
Where.....:	.....times
When..... :	.....times
How.....:	.....times
clarification .....	..... .times
Words/phrases:	
*	
*	
*	
*	
Comments/ summary :( excitement, improvement, reflection, etc.	



Talk about a topic: there is a separable sheet of each member

a) for the speaker:                      b) for other members:      c) for the reporter:

Date:            name:	Date:            name:	Date:            name:
Topic:	Note:	Question type:
Contents: (words & phrases)	Who.....	Who ...
	What.....	What
	Where.....	Where
	When.....	When
	How.....	How...
	Words/phrases...	Summary:
	Topic/main ideas:	





Table 1

*Student Ranking of Favorite Activities*

Activity	First	Second	Third
Presentation Project	24	5	1
Group Talk	1	17	11
Practice with ALT	11	8	14
Listening Exercise with CD	0	0	4

Figure 1.

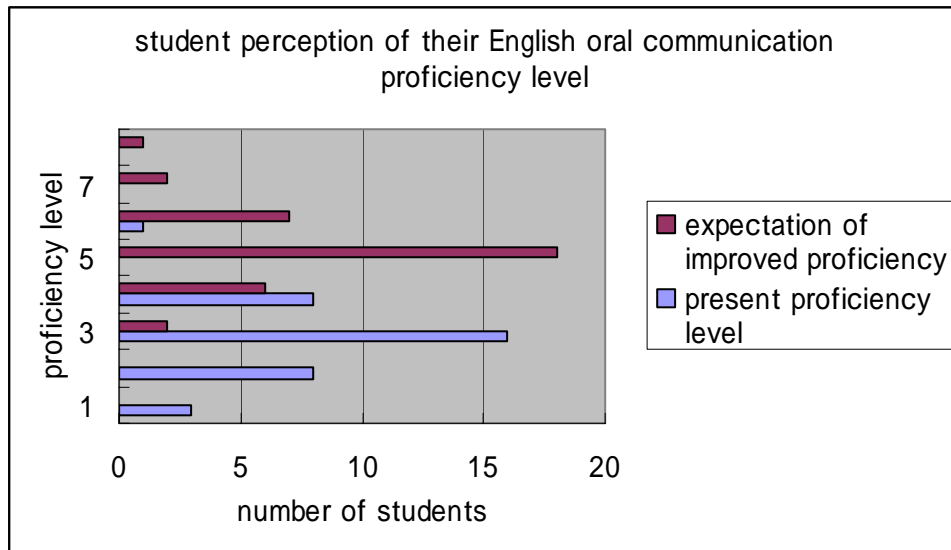
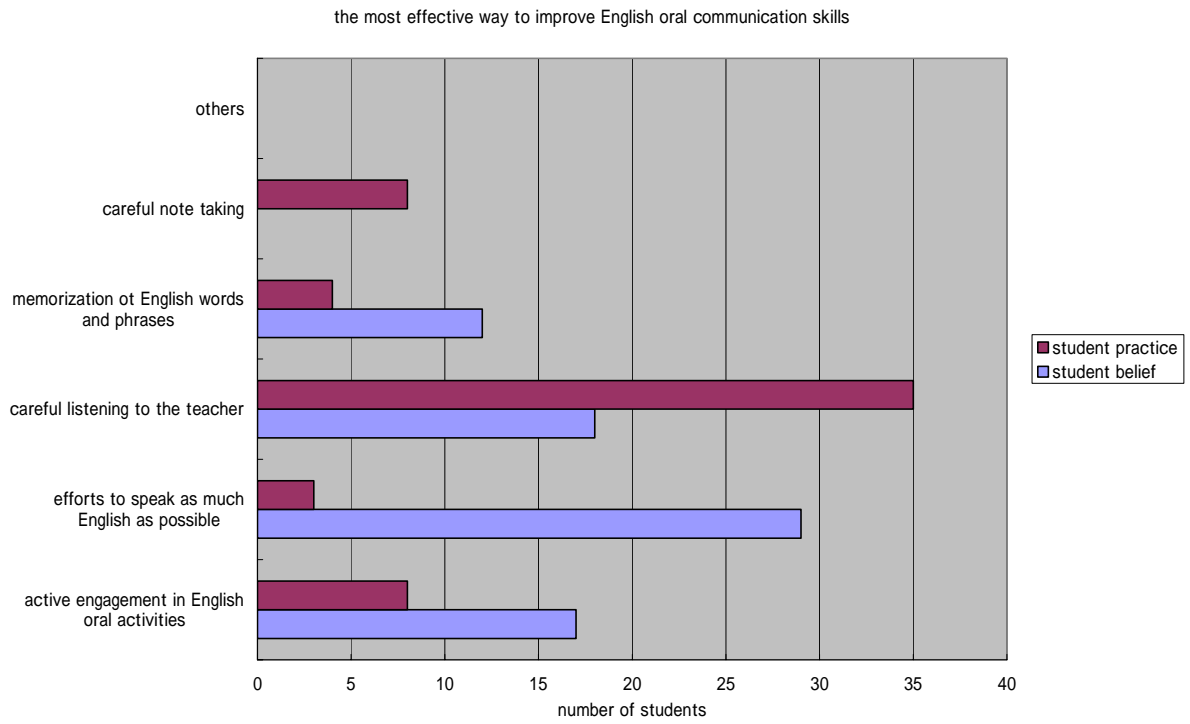


Figure 2.



Footnote

<sup>1</sup>All names mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms.

