

## 論文

# Promoting a Willingness to Communicate in Japanese Students

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## 要 旨

外国語指導で重要なことは、生徒自身の意欲と教師が生徒をやる気にさせることだと言われている。しかし言語習得の意欲はあるが、授業中にその言語で話そうとする熱意のない生徒がよくみられる。A Willingness to communicate (WTC) とは学習者が‘コミュニケーションをとろうという意志’を意味する。コミュニケーションの授業では WTC が不可欠で、それを欠く生徒のスピーキング力は伸びにくい。したがって授業で教師はできるだけ生徒の WTC を促進しなければならない。

この論文で私はコミュニケーションの授業で生徒のスピーキング力向上に必要な、WTC を日本の大学一年生を対象に調査するだけでなく、大学入学以前の語学学習環境についても考察が必要だと考える。

Keywords: student motivation (学生の動機), willingness to communicate, university students (大学生), English communication (英語のコミュニケーション), Japan (日本)

## Abstract

Much has been written about language learner motivation, and developing student motivation is regarded by most teachers as a

vital part of foreign language instruction. However, it is quite possible for students to be motivated to study a language but yet be reluctant to employ it.

Whether or not a student uses language when free to do so has been described as a student's willingness to communicate (WTC). WTC is vital to communication classes and its absence can potentially slow a student's speaking development.

Therefore, teachers in the communication classroom must endeavour to develop WTC in students as much as possible. In this paper I aim to examine the willingness to communicate (WTC) of first-year Japanese university students with a view to finding ways that facilitate speaking in the university communication classroom. To this end, it is also necessary to examine the language learning context of students prior to joining university.

## **The Japanese Context**

Before entering university, most Japanese students will have studied English for at least six years. Preparations for the university entrance examination begin in earnest many months before the first wave of tests are taken. The English requirement for the first entrance examination is the same for all students with the individual universities then demanding that further tests be taken as their course or prestige demands. Given that the first entrance exam is taken by all, schools across Japan feverishly prepare their students for the test to such a degree that this extends far beyond the classroom and has become a national obsession (Shimahara, 1991). As Hyland points out, "Written examinations alone determine grades and future success" (Hyland 1993 p. 73).

These examinations are the final and most important stage of tests Japanese students have been preparing for and working through since infancy. The impact they have on the future lives of students cannot be overestimated as highlighted below;

"The sad fact is that the salary and prestige that a Japanese executive has in his sixties may have less to do with his job performance in his forties and fifties and more to do with whether he went to cram school and was a good test taker as a

four- or five-year old.” (Karan, 2005: 183).

With English as a compulsory element of the entrance examination it is unsurprising that it exerts an enormous impact on English teaching at high schools. This influence on teaching is seen as being largely negative by many (Terauchi 1995, Shimahara 1991, Fujimoto 1999, McVeigh, 2002) as English ceases to be a means of communication and becomes a collection of rules and forms to be memorised to pass the examination, from this meaning is lost and the subject becomes dull:

“Pupils study English for six years. However, this is with a teacher who gives students facts and rules about English, with no discussion or opinion from the students. Even the asking of questions to clarify is generally frowned on in Japanese schools. The language taught is almost totally grammar-based, using reading, writing, and lots of exercises on paper. And oral work usually takes the form of the whole class repeating phrases in unison. Much of the English taught in Japan is still formal, stilted and dated.” (O’Sullivan, 1996: 106)

Not only are grammar-based teaching methods favoured in Japan but speaking activities are given a marginal role. Until recently the entrance examination was solely reading and writing. A listening component was added in 2006 but speaking is still absent resulting in it being skipped over by Japanese teachers preparing their students for the university examination.

Acknowledging the imbalance that exists in English teaching in Japan, the Ministry of Education has attempted to promote a greater amount of speaking in English classes. A press release from the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2002) recommends that oral communication be taught much more in Japanese schools. However, the release gives a preferred focus for schools, merely suggesting rather than implementing. Recent writing (Karan, 2005) and personal experience teaching at high school illustrates that Japanese teachers still concentrate on the university entrance examination, focusing on reading and writing at the expense of speaking. Speaking activities do exist but usually serve the purpose of reinforcing a grammar point or supporting other teaching. Appendix 1 shows an example of the first oral communication unit taken from a Japanese school text book (Kairyudo, 2004) used by a colleague at an ‘academic’ high school. In this unit exercises focus on:

- Reading (Focus 1)

- Reading and writing - gap fill (Focus 2)
- Writing about transport and picture based discussion (Focus 3)
- Listening exercise (Focus 4)

Opportunities to speak are clearly at a minimum. When evaluated against a model of speaking such as Thornbury's AAA model, we can see evidence of some awareness raising through introduction of how a discussion is organised and performed, and appropriation through writing and listening activities. However, there are no activities promoting autonomy that require students to produce large amounts of real life language in an interactive situation suggested as necessary for autonomy (Thornbury, 2005).

In addition to speaking activities receiving less attention than reading, writing and listening, the students themselves have been described as possessing the characteristics of poor language learners (O'Sullivan, 1996). Literature on the characteristics of Japanese students (Karan, 2005, Dorji, 1997) suggests that Japanese students tend to be quiet and reserved. Research conducted among foreign English teachers found that teachers perceived that Japanese students do not like to take risks in the classroom (Dorji, 1997). Japanese students have also been characterised as being unable to express their opinions, debate or even discuss issues (Allen, 1996). One frequently cited reason for this lack of personal expression in class is a strong group mentality and preoccupation with maintaining group cohesion (O'Sullivan, 1996, Anderson, 1993). The Japanese saying of "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down" is often used to illustrate this phenomenon.

Personal experience has demonstrated that these characteristics are not as common as suggested, though there is undoubtedly some truth in such generalisations. Despite this characterisation, a number of studies suggest that students wish to move in another direction. When asked why they studied English, 60% of university students answered that communication was most important (Terauchi, 1995). A desire for more semi-free to free task types was also expressed by university students (Davies, 2006). Such findings suggest that the stereotype of the Japanese student held by many (O'Sullivan, 1996; Atkinson, 1997; Anderson, 1993; Nozaki, 1993) is flawed and it is no surprise that these assumptions have been challenged as considered later.

From the context described above we see that students entering university English classes will have studied English for a period of six years in an environment which places little emphasis on speaking and is dominated by grammar study. With such little experience of speaking in English and demonstrating a reserved classroom demeanour it

is perhaps no great surprise that a reluctance to speak has been described as the greatest problem in teaching English in Japan (O'Sullivan, 1996).

## **Speaking and Willingness to Communicate**

Bygate (1987) suggested that speaking is a skill which employs knowledge about a language. Knowledge of the target language can increase through instruction though the skill of speaking is different as it requires practice. The notion of practice as a requirement for speaking to improve is well supported (Thornbury, 2005; Harmer, 2007). Yashima et al who wrote specifically on the Japanese context stated explicitly that “to improve communication skills one needs to use language” (2004: 122). If improvement in speaking is dependent on practice as the literature and common sense suggest, ways to break through the ‘wall of silence’ as Helgesen (1993) termed the Japanese university communication class, and increase Japanese students’ WTC need to be found.

However, Dörnyei points out that simply providing opportunities for practice is not enough:

“It is not uncommon to find people who tend to avoid entering L2 communication situations even if they possess a high level of communicative competence. This implies that there is a further layer of mediating factors between the competence to communicate and putting this competence into practice” (2005: 207).

This ‘layer’ of mediating factors is the student’s WTC which has been defined as “the tendency of an individual to initiate communication when free to do so” (Yashima, 2002: 55) and seen as a reflection of the predisposition or readiness to talk in various situations (MacIntyre et al, 1998). WTC is a prerequisite for speaking and is not speaking itself. It is quite possible for WTC to exist without any communication occurring; for example when a teacher asks a question, several students may raise their hands to answer indicating WTC but only one will get to speak the answer (MacIntyre et al, 1998).

Students with low WTC may possess a great deal of language knowledge and good communicative competence but not speak, resulting in a lack of practice which can potentially slow their speaking development. This view of WTC being the major prerequisite of language development is shared by Dörnyei who adds that WTC “draws together a host of learner variables that have been well established as influences on

second language acquisition and use” and leads him to conclude that WTC is “the ultimate goal of L2 instruction” (2005: 210).

## Willingness to Communicate

MacIntyre’s (1994) model of WTC highlights perceived communication competence and communication anxiety as the two factors strongly influencing WTC. Recent work confirms their importance (Yashima, 2004, 2009; MacIntyre et al 1998; Tsui, 2006; Dörnyei, 2005). However, it is clear that other factors have the potential to influence WTC, especially when you consider that English teaching brings together two or more cultures in a learning environment. MacIntyre et al (1998) conceptualised WTC in a model (Figure 1) that considers multiple variables.

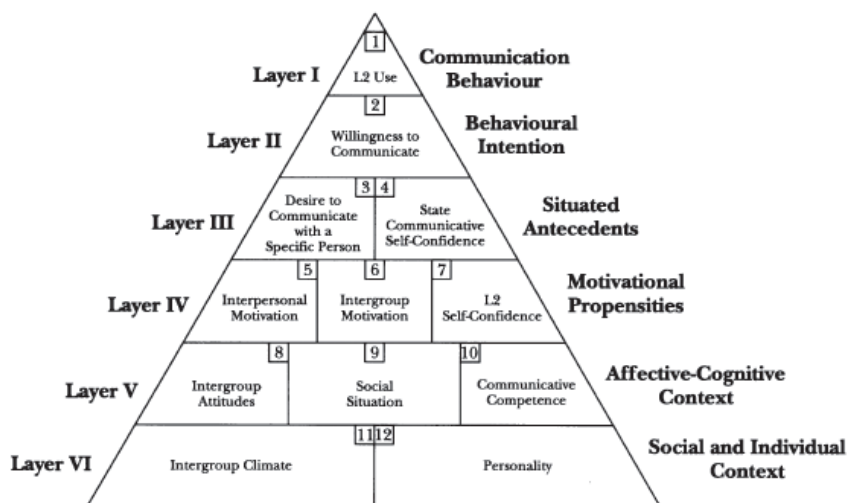


Figure 1

MacIntyre et al (1998: 547)

Here WTC sits directly next to L2 use indicating its vital importance to speaking and other means of production. Below WTC are its influencing factors. MacIntyre et al differentiated between immediate situation-specific influences on WTC, found in the first three layers, and more enduring and stable influences in the last three layers. However, a pyramid model suggests a top-down decrease in the importance of factors that constitute

WTC. This is not the case in the model as no weighting is given to the individual variables. In addition, the pyramid model does not indicate the interrelationship between its components, a shortcoming acknowledged by one of its creators (Dörnyei, 2005).

The model seems to have been created specifically with English as a second language in mind. Variables of experience with members of the L2 community (layer 5) and the desire to interact with a specific person outside of the classroom (layer 3) seem more geared to ESL, rather than a Japanese EFL context in which the student is very unlikely to have spoken to a foreigner or experienced L2 culture beyond the classroom or media. However, a WTC study conducted among Japanese university students found that the results “demonstrated the applicability of MacIntyre et al’s (1998) conceptual model in an EFL context” (Yashima, 2002: 62). As research suggests MacIntyre et al’s model is valid in a Japanese EFL context, and because the model is widely accepted, I intend to use the factors it suggests contribute to WTC as a guide in examining WTC in the Japanese context.

## **Factors Influencing Willingness to Communicate**

The *desire to communicate with a specific person* is immediate and situational and may be influenced by the attractiveness, proximity and repeated exposure to the person in question (MacIntyre et al, 1998). In a Japanese EFL context, this would seem to focus on the native English speaking teacher as contact with foreigners or English speakers outside of the classroom is quite limited. In such a context the student has no choice in who they speak to so WTC depends largely on the opinion and familiarity they have with the teacher.

Within several areas of the model (such as *Intergroup Attitudes* and *Intergroup Climate*) MacIntyre et al also highlight the broader, more stable and enduring desire to communicate and the relationship the student has with the L2 community suggesting; “It seems a firm conclusion that the desire to affiliate with people who use another language, and to participate in another culture, has a powerful influence on language learning and communication behaviour” (1998: 551). Yet in Japan English is often viewed as an academic subject rather than a vehicle through which to communicate with people of another culture. Additionally, Yashima (2002) found that when it is viewed as a means of communication, English in the minds of Japanese learners is something vague and larger

than, for example, American community or culture, it is a way to communicate with the world around Japan, particularly with Asian neighbours.

In the Japanese context, holding a positive view of, and desire to communicate with, foreign cultures or specific individuals is seen as a vital contributing factor towards WTC by several scholars. Yashima (2002) and Yashima et al (2004) conducted research among Japanese students and concluded that those students with an interest in international affairs and conscious of how they relate themselves to the world were more motivated to study English (Yashima et al, 2004). The students' interest in foreign affairs and perception of themselves using English in the world was termed *international posture* (Yashima, 2002). According to Yashima, "international posture influences motivation, which in turn, predicts proficiency and L2 communication confidence" (2002: 63). The development of 'international posture' may further the belief of some (Wen & Clement, 2003) that MacIntyre et al's model requires adaptation when it is applied to culturally specific contexts. Wen and Clements (2003) study found factors influencing WTC in China, such as emphasis on the collective, face concerns, notions of insider and out groups, and the learning environment, all impacted on the desire to communicate and were not adequately represented in the model. However, Yashima concluded that the model did adequately fit the Japanese context and that the notion of international posture fits within the 'Motivational Propensities' of layer IV (Yashima, 2002).

Self-confidence is also seen by MacIntyre et al as a vital factor influencing WTC, either in the immediate and momentary form of *State Communicative Self-Confidence* or in the more enduring *L2 Self-Confidence*. Self-confidence depends on the two key concepts of perceived competence and a lack of anxiety (MacIntyre et al, 1998). Anxiety can increase due to reasons such as the number of listeners and previous bad experiences (MacIntyre et al, 1998). Self-confidence, like the desire to communicate is also seen as including both immediate and enduring forms.

As we have seen, numerous writers point out that Asian/Japanese students exhibit characteristics not well suited to L2 speaking (Tsui, 1996, O'Sullivan, 1996, Karan, 2005, Zhang & Head, 2010). These characteristics such as passivity, a focus on group cohesion, fear of mistakes and derision, fear of exposing low proficiency, reluctance to show or discuss opinions or feelings all can contribute to reticence to speak and so negatively impact WTC.

However, this view of Asian students is a contested one. Some academics argue



that Asian students are not naturally obedient or passive and that “A homogeneous body of Asian students who represent the stereotypes seems to exist more in the imagination of Western academia than in the actual classrooms of Asian societies” (Kumarvadivelu, 2003: 710). It is suggested that, if students display such characteristics in class, it is a consequence of the wider educational context and the norms set by other subjects (Littlewood, 2000, Holliday, 1994) rather than any cultural belief or disposition (Kumarvadivelu, 2003). This view not only introduces the wider educational context/tradition as a variable of WTC but also suggests that, if other subjects set the norms to which Japanese students are accustomed, imported methods of teaching English may not be suitable.

This notion, first developed by Holliday (1994), suggests that communicative methods developed in private British, Australian and North American (BANA) language schools are not suitable for direct unadapted transplantation in to state run schools within the rest of the world (TESEP). This notion, echoed by Liu (1998), highlights the great divergence of classroom realities in BANA and TESEP contexts and that, as a consequence, adoption of methods unsuitable to the context may affect WTC. Such a view would indicate that the push for greater communicative methods in English classes within Japan by bodies such as MEXT, may actually result in a reduced WTC as such methods are suitable to BANA classrooms rather than Japanese classrooms populated by students of mixed ability, differing attitudes towards English and for whom communicative methods may be culturally incongruent.

## **Encouraging a Willingness to Communicate**

From examining WTC we can see that perceived communicative competence, self-confidence, low anxiety, a desire to interact with the L2 community/international posture and a methodology relevant to the students all play an important role. To increase WTC, the prerequisite for speaking, we then need to employ ways that promote these factors and are relevant to the Japanese context.

A major way to improve WTC, identified by many academics, is consideration of the teacher-student relationship (Zhang & Head, 2010; Tsui, 1996; Wen & Clement, 2003; Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003; Xie, 2010). Increased teacher immediacy and involvement with students through expressions of affection, having time for students, expressing

interest in their work and so on, were found to reduce anxiety and increase WTC (Wen & Clement, 2003). Such actions were found to increase group cohesion and improved the classroom environment. Kenny (1994) echoes these findings in a study among Japanese university students. Kenny found that just simply remembering and using students' names resulted in increased WTC and spoken production (Kenny, 1994 in Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003).

Improvement of the teacher-student relationship goes beyond mere pleasantries however. Involving students in the selection of classroom topics was found to generate more opportunities for participation and increase WTC (Xie, 2010; Zhang & Head, 2010). Discussion with students over course content could also potentially be a way to foster the international posture that Yashima suggests is vital to WTC in the Japanese context. Asking students for their input and preferences on content and topic choice requires that they consider how English can serve them and in what roles they envision themselves employing English. Such discussions serve not only to make the content more relevant to students and thereby increase WTC but also potentially make students aware of the relevance of English for them and increase their international posture.

Adopting certain teaching methods has also been suggested to improve WTC. For example, methods such as allowing students to prepare prior to speaking (Harmer, 2007), lengthening waiting times for answers (Tsui, 1996), and accepting and encouraging all contributions (Xie, 2010) have all been offered as ways of reducing anxiety and increasing confidence, therefore improving WTC.

The final suggestion I wish to highlight, and one that I feel is particularly relevant in a Japanese university context of large class sizes, is that of using peer support and group work. Having peers discuss subjects in pairs or groups prior to a wider discussion was found to have a positive impact on WTC as it gives “students a chance to rehearse their thoughts to each other in a low risk, high gain situation” (Tsui, 1996: 148). Work with Japanese university students likewise found that pair and group work had a welcome impact on motivation and WTC (Helgesen, 1993). My own teaching experience has shown that students are much more likely to speak freely in smaller groups than in front of the whole class.

## Conclusion

The literature indicates that a wide range of factors influence WTC. However the teacher in Japan, can take encouragement from the fact that a number of studies conducted in East Asia and in Japan specifically have concluded that there are a number of way in which to foster greater WTC. Generating an increased international posture or motivation to speak by helping students realise the uses of English for them in a global community, and forging greater bonds and respect between student and teacher seem to be key ways to improve WTC relevant to the Japanese context. Through implementation of methods that promote these factors, speaking classes in Japan can benefit from a livelier and more cohesive atmosphere and, ultimately, see students speaking out much more.

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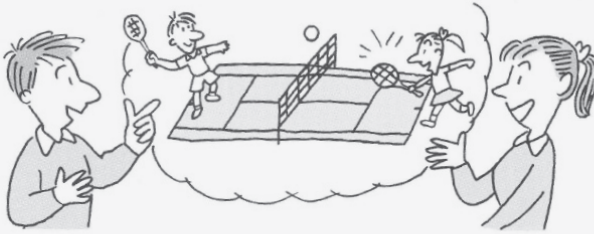
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## Appendix 1

The following four pages comprise chapter 1 in the Japanese high school textbook Expressway: Oral Communication published by Kairyudo in 2004.

# UNIT 1 Discussion

## FOCUS 1



Talking in our own language can be a lot of fun. We make friends by talking to people. We learn things by talking.

Talking is the first step to discussion. Discussion is a bit harder than just talking, but it starts in the same way. When you discuss something, you have to remember it is like a game. For example, in tennis you have to keep hitting the ball over the net. If you don't return the ball, then the other player cannot do anything.

Discussion is the same. You have to keep thinking of new ideas to keep the discussion game going. This activity keeps your brain moving and makes you a more interesting person.

To discuss something in a foreign language, like English, is quite difficult, but you can do it. Remember, simple sentences are okay, and you can make mistakes. Just express yourself.

**VOCABULARY** make friends: 友達をつくる a bit hard: ちょっと難しい in the same way: 同じように  
for example: 例えば brain: 頭脳 you can make mistakes: 間違いをしてもよい

**COMPREHENSION**

1. What two things can we do by talking?
2. Why is discussion like tennis?
3. What do you have to do to keep the discussion going?
4. What advice should you remember for discussion in English?

2

Discussion ●

● FOCUS 2

■ Look at this conversation between Terry White and you.

Terry: Hello. My name's Terry White. What's your name?

You: I'm (1) \_\_\_\_\_  
(2) \_\_\_\_\_ from?

Terry: I'm Australian. I work as an ALT here. What year are you in?

You: (3) \_\_\_\_\_ year. I like (4) \_\_\_\_\_  
What (5) \_\_\_\_\_?

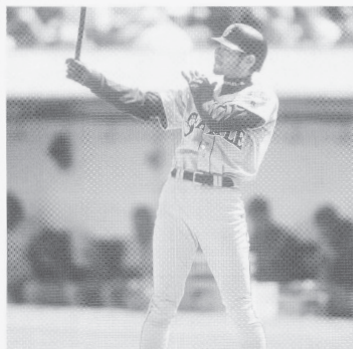
Terry: I like cricket and rugby. But I like baseball, too. I watch it on TV a lot.

You: My favorite team is (6) \_\_\_\_\_  
What's your (7) \_\_\_\_\_?

Terry: Well, I don't really have a favorite team, but I like the Yomiuri Giants.

By the way, why do you think some Japanese baseball players want to play in the Major Leagues?

You: (8) \_\_\_\_\_.



Ichiro, a Japanese Major-Leaguer

**A** Fill in the blanks with your own ideas.

**B** Practice the conversation with your classmates.



UNIT 1

FOCUS 3

Look at the pictures and answer the questions.



*Courtesy of NASDA*

**A** Describe each picture.

**B** Tell a story about one of the pictures from your own experience.

For Your Information

**Example:**

I travel to school every day in a crowded commuter train, and I have to stand for one hour. I really wish the journey was shorter.

**C** Discuss with classmates the advantages and disadvantages of each type of travel.

● FOCUS 4

How to do group discussions:

1. Choose a topic.
2. List your ideas.
3. Give your ideas in the discussion.
4. Listen to your classmates.
5. Make new ideas during the discussion.
6. Let others speak but also make sure you speak as much as you can.
7. You need a chairperson who will introduce the topic and will control the discussion.
8. You need one note taker for the group.
9. After the discussion the note taker will summarize the discussion.
10. You can take a vote to decide which opinion is the most persuasive.



■ Listen to and read the following example discussion. 

TOPIC: *How have manners changed in Japan?*

**Chairperson:** We're going to have a discussion about changing manners in Japan. First, Ms. Aoki, what do you think?

**Ms. Aoki:** Yes, I think that people are less formal nowadays. Even when we talk to our teachers, we're more relaxed than years ago. We can have an enjoyable conversation with them. 5

**Chairperson:** Mr. Ban, what's your view?

**Mr. Ban:** I agree, but I think we've become less courteous, because people are bowing less. I think people are showing less respect to each other. I don't think this is a good thing.

**Chairperson:** Okay, Ms. Chen, what do you think? 10

**Ms. Chen:** In China, where I come from, and in Japan, too, I think good manners are important for smooth relations between people. Good manners make us all feel better.

**Chairperson:** Thank you. Well, thank you for your views. I think we can agree that manners have changed in Japan. But good manners are important. They teach us to respect our fellow human beings. We get less angry and live more pleasantly when we show good manners to each other. 15

5