English Lessons at Elementary School in Japan Aimed at Improving Willingness to Communicate

Mami Sakashita,[1]
Shijo Elementary School, Japan

Fumiya Shinozaki[2]
fshino@cc.osaka-kyoiku.ac.jp
Osaka Kyoiku University, Japan

Abstract

In this paper, we explore practical strategies to enhance willingness to communicate (WTC) among elementary school students during English lessons. The study focuses on creating a supportive environment that encourages interaction and fosters confidence in communication. The research also aims to investigate the impact of communication strategy (CS) instruction on students' attitudes toward communication. Specifically, it examines changes in WTC and confidence levels among fifth-grade students. The methodology involved designing a series of English lessons centered around interaction. Activities included exchanging business cards, sending birthday cards, and discussing timetables. Pre- and interim-questionnaires collected data from students' self-assessments and reflections. The study focused on six students who exhibited notable changes in attitudes. The results showed that many students enjoyed communicating their thoughts and learning about others. Confidence levels increased as students actively participated in interactions. Successful experiences were linked to the teaching of CS expressions. Moreover, acceptance of others' contributions played a crucial role in creating a safe space for communication. The study's implications highlight the importance of fostering an accepting attitude toward others' communication. Teachers can promote confidence by emphasizing receptive responses. Overall, the research underscores the significance of creating a positive classroom atmosphere for language learning, ultimately empowering students to express themselves effectively in a foreign language setting.

Keywords: Communication Strategy, Confidence, Willingness to Communicate

INTRODUCTION

In order for students to understand that foreign languages are a means to communicate their thoughts and ideas and to get to know others, it is essential to try a variety of lessons for measure. Hattori (2021), in discussing the current courses of study in Japan, notes that the difference from the previous courses of study is that the current one suggests setting up situations in which foreign languages are inevitably used for communication, devise in ways that students can enjoy the interaction with others, and to provide devices that encourage proactive communication.

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[1]Corresponding Author: Fumiya Shinozaki, English Education Department, Osaka Kyoiku University, 4-698-1 Asahigaoka, Kashiwara, Osaka, Japan, 582-8582. email: fshino@cc.osaka-kyoiku.ac.jp

There are many factors involved in verbal output. One of them is Willingness to Communicate (WTC), which is a concept that describes learners' activeness for communication (Maclntyre et al., 1998). Shinozaki and Yokoyama (2023) analyzed students' spoken output in terms of WTC, having things to communicate, anxiety, confidence, and instructors' intervention. The results indicated that all the factors were related to the improvement of output. Inayah and Lisdawati (2017) revealed that students who had difficulties in speaking tended to have problems with their motivation and self-confidence. Depending on the stage of learning and age, strategies to enhance WTC and related elements may vary. For example, Yetkin and Özer (2022) conducted a survey with secondary school students, finding that both age and gender were significant factors that predicted WTC. Given that WTC is developed with the improvement in confidence, which led to active output, it is beneficial to consider this for elementary school students to build up their confidence in interaction with others in English.

Watanabe (2017) stated that message-level communication activities rather than information-level communication activities are more likely to activate learners' WTC, suggesting the importance of interactive communication activities. Regarding interaction, Yamanaka (2022) states that it is important not only to increase the quantity of interaction, but also to improve the quality of interaction by adapting it to the actual conditions of the classroom and learners. It is reckoned that setting objectives, scenes, and situations based on an appropriate understanding of the actual conditions of the learners is one way to improve the quality of interaction.

In addition, communication strategies (CS) are regarded as effective ways to promote smooth interaction. According to Izumi and Kadota (2016), there are two types of CS: compensation strategies and achievement strategies. Compensation strategies are to compensate for stagnant communication or lack of communication skills, such as not being able to come up with a proper vocabulary or not being able to understand what the other person is saying. Achievement strategies are to promote effective and successful communication, such as using connecting words and checking understanding. It is also said that CS instruction gradually fosters an attitude of active communication without fear of making mistakes or silence. Izumi et al. suggest three stages of CS instruction as points to keep in mind. The first stage is the "motivation and anxiety reduction stage". In the WTC model (Maclntyre et al., 1998), as in Figure 1, the goal is to increase learners' confidence and motivation in speaking and listening to English by eliminating anxiety about English communication and actively using English to experience successful experiences. The WTC model (Maclntyre et al., 1998) depicts the relationship between confidence and motivation with WTC, and elementary school students who are just beginning to learn English should be taught with these factors in mind.

Thus, very few studies have taken into account the learning stages of elementary school students and analyzed them from the perspective of self-confidence and WTC, using message-level communication activities and instruction using CS.

In this study, we report on the changes in students' attitudes toward communication in situations where interactions with others played a central role and provide CS instructions in a series of activities in elementary school English classes. The research questions are as follows.
(1) Do students' attitudes toward English classes change when they learn about others and tell others about themselves through communication with others in a foreign language?
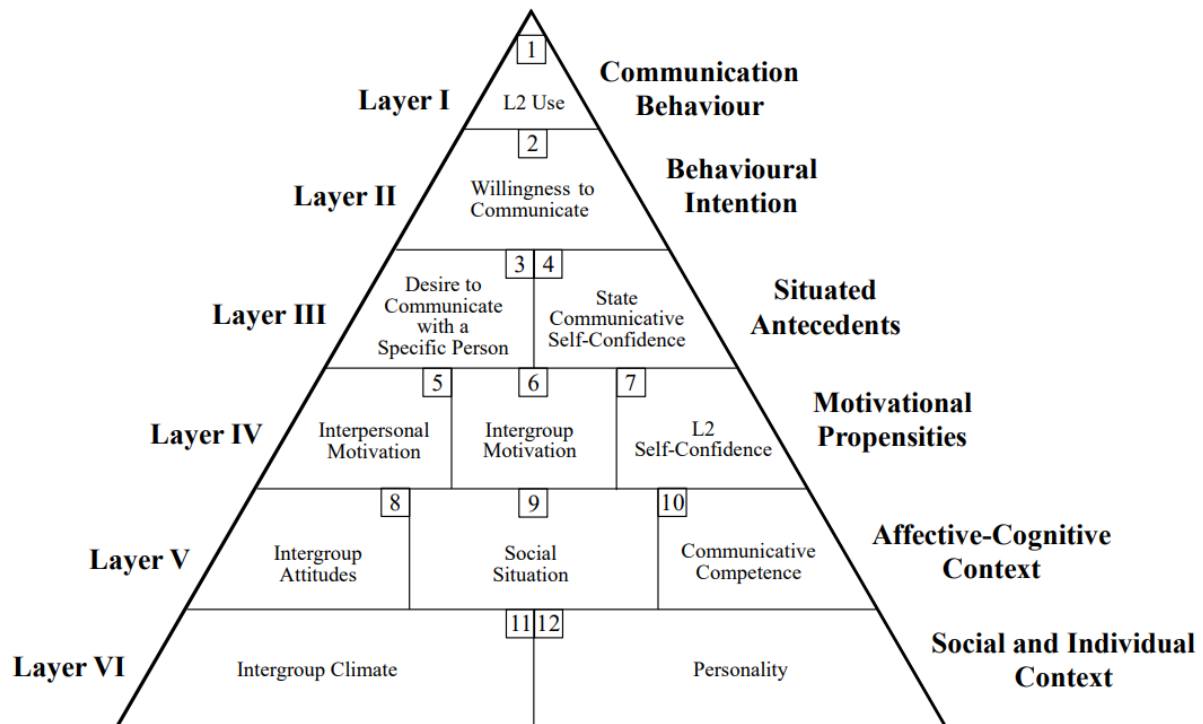(2) How does fostering an accepting attitude relate to improving self-confidence and WTC?

Figure 1. Heuristic Model of Variables Influencing WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p.547)

METHODS

The participants were 32 fifth-grade students in a public elementary school, in a class that one of the authors was in charge of. First, a questionnaire survey was conducted prior to the lesson practice to ascertain the current status of the students' English language learning. Based on the analysis of the current situation, the content of the lesson was considered and the first lesson was implemented. Next, the same questionnaire survey was conducted at the midpoint of the series of instructions to confirm the current status at that point. Based on the results of this survey and those of the teacher's observation of the students, further lesson practice was conducted. Finally, we focused on the characteristic students and described as much as possible about what kind of transformation was observed from the beginning until the end of the practice. In doing so, the CAN-DO list (Appendix B) used at the school was also utilized and referenced.

RESULTS

Before the Lessons

Based on the results of the pre-questionnaire (Table 1) and the teacher's observation of the students at the time of the survey, it became clear that there were a certain number of students who lacked confidence in English classes. Therefore, it was considered necessary to devise ways to help them experience small successes through communication activities in English. In addition, to help students understand the significance of learning a foreign language, we decided to conduct the first lesson under the theme of "Let's think about what you can do as a leader in creating a global society," in conjunction with a cross-curricular social studies class.

Table 1. Pre-Questionnaire Results (31 respondents)

Questions	Yes	Fair	No
1. Are you interested in foreign languages or foreign countries?	8	22	1
2. Do you like English classes?	6	24	1
3. Do you find English classes difficult?	11	14	6
4. Do you want to be able to talk with people from other countries?	13	17	1
5. Do you enjoy speaking English?	16	14	1

Furthermore, it was important to set the content of the communication activities so that the students were able to find meaning and value in learning English. This study indicates that forming and reconstructing ideas while organizing information according to the purpose, scene, and situation becomes vital in dialogue with diverse people. It is essential to consider from various angles whether the purpose of the communicative activities in the unit goal is clear, and whether the scene and situation are appropriate. We assumed that a teacher's attempt to create lessons by taking these elements into account would lead to an increase in opportunities for the students to develop their self-confidence.

Lessons in Unit 1 / Unit 2

In Unit 1, the unit goal was "Let's give a business card to a new teacher and say hello!" Since the actual purpose of exchanging business cards is often a first meeting, we set the goal of exchanging business cards with teachers with whom we had never spoken before. The students were seen trying to exchange business cards with various teachers during recess, including visiting the principal's office.

In Unit 2, "Let's send birthday cards to each other and make everyone happy!" was the unit goal. Since the focus of the unit was to ask each other what friends, family members, and teachers liked and wanted, we decided to take steps to enable students to engage in the activity with a greater sense of partnering, based on the analysis of the students' task in Unit 1. Tanabe (2019) also states that when devising activities that integrate language skills, we should not forget to include partner awareness as an element of activity design. In order to create a sense of the other party, the interaction should not be an activity where the participants just say scripted sentences to each other. Therefore, the importance of trying to understand what the other person says and accepting the other person himself or herself was highlighted. As expressions for its purpose, "Sounds nice," "Oh, I see," "Me, too," and "Why?" were introduced to the students. These are considered as the connective words or responses of CS expressions. By the teacher's posting these reactions on the blackboard every lesson and actively using them themselves, the students absorbed them and became accustomed to using these reactions in their interactions.

Lessons in Unit 3

After the implementation of Unit 2, an interim questionnaire was administered (Table 2). As a result, the number of students who answered that they liked the foreign language classes and that they wanted to be able to talk with foreigners slightly increased. In addition, the number of students who felt that foreign language classes were difficult decreased. On the other hand, two students responded negatively in the mid-term questionnaire, despite their overall positive responses in the pre-questionnaire; direct interviews with these two students revealed that they did not feel confident because they did not understand English.

Table 2. Interim-Questionnaire Results (31 respondents)

Questions	Yes	Fair	No
1. Are you interested in foreign languages or foreign countries?	8	20	3
2. Do you like English classes?	8	20	3
3. Do you find English classes difficult?	9	15	7
4. Do you want to be able to talk with people from other countries?	17	12	2
5. Do you enjoy speaking English?	12	17	2

In Unit 3, the goal of the unit was to introduce their timetable to 5th graders in other schools. The textbook had a lesson plan to create a timetable to make their dreams come true, but we judged that it would be difficult for all students to imagine their dreams for the future, and that the purpose, scene, and situation of creating a dream timetable would be difficult for them to grasp. We decided to introduce the school timetable to other schools by recording it on video and sending it to each other so that we could exchange information about each other's school timetables. When we told the students that we were going to send the video, they said that they were "embarrassed" and "anxious," but once the practice began, they said, "I want to give a presentation so that the other person can understand." Once they started practicing, they were seen engaging in the activity with a sense of awareness of their partner.

We devised a small talk to be conducted every hour, as we believe that the method of input is crucial to give students an awareness of the content of the unit goals and their counterparts. Small talk is an activity set in the upper grades, and is supposed to be conducted once every two hours for 5th graders, focusing on listening to the instructor. The purpose of conducting this activity at the beginning of the class was to help the students visualize themselves in the unit goals and activities. In some cases, the teacher interacted with the ALTs in front of the students or gave a slide presentation, but in other cases, the teacher had the students watch a video that had been prepared in advance. In order to motivate students to listen to the content of the videos as if they were themselves, we created several videos in which various teachers at the school appeared, so that the students could visualize the actual activities. The videos show teachers trying their best to convey their thoughts in English, and the students look forward to the videos every hour, wondering "Which teacher will appear in the video today?" Sometimes, the teachers changed their voices to play two roles, and sometimes they used puppets.

Analysis of Focused Students

In this section, we focused on six students who did or did not show a remarkable change in their attitudes toward communication and summarize their situations.

Student A
At the beginning of April, he answered "Yes" to the item "Do you find English classes difficult?" He also answered "Yes" to the same item in the interim-questionnaire in June. However, on the CAN-DO list, he answered "Yes" to all items, and in his reflections on the first semester, he stated that he enjoyed communicating with his friends and exchanging what he could and could not do using the tablet.

Student B
At the beginning of April, he answered "Fair" to the item "Do you find English classes difficult?", but by June, he answered "Yes". However, the CAN-DO lists were all checked

"yes," and in his reflections on the first semester, he said, "I enjoyed the talks. I can understand others, and if I do so, we can get along."

Student C
Both the pre- and interim-questionnaires showed negative responses for all items. However, on the CAN-DO list, all but three items were checked as "I can do it." He described as "I enjoyed talking with my friends and teachers. I want to speak more fluently. Since he stated that he was not good at conversing in other situations but wanted to try harder in English, we can assume that the English classes helped him to get rid of the sense of difficulty he had in conversing.

Student D
In the interim-questionnaire, all items were answered negatively. However, on the CAN-DO list, he checked "I can do it." for all but three items, and he described that he enjoyed being able to speak confidently in English, indicating that the experience of speaking English in front of everyone helped him gain confidence.

Student E
In the pre- and interim-questionnaires, he answered "Yes" to the question "Do you find English classes difficult?" However, at the end of the first semester, he stated, "I am confident in my English skills." From the latter half of Unit 2, he started to raise his hands to make presentations and interact with others in front of everyone.

Student F
Similar to Student E, he answered "Yes" to "Do you find English classes difficult?" in the pre- and interim-questionnaires, but checked "I can do it." for all items on the CAN-DO list. In addition, in his final reflections, he set high goals, stating "I want to become a Japanese who speaks fluent English." He seemed to enjoy making gestures and taking reactions more than in the daily class.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the two questionnaire surveys, many students wrote positive reflections on their worksheets at the end of the first semester. In the CAN-DO list for students to check what they could do in the first semester, many students checked "I can do it." in almost all items. In addition, in early July, more than 10 students raised their hands and expressed their willingness to communicate with ALTs in front of the class, an outstanding increase from only two students in April. The results of the individual analyses show that the change in attitudes toward foreign languages can be categorized into several trends.

For example, the commonality between Student A and Student B is that they found foreign language classes "difficult," but they enjoyed the activities through "interaction" with their friends, and furthermore, they realized the benefits (understanding and getting along with others) that they gained from the experience. It was found that even if students feel that foreign language classes are difficult, if they themselves find value in the activities conducted in class, they will, as a result, recognize that they can do more, which will build to their self-confidence. As Imai (2022) stated, it can be confirmed here that negative and positive emotions are not located at opposite poles.

Student C had negative responses to the English classes in all of the questionnaires, but in the final unit, he began to actively participate in the activities, and from his final reflection, it can be said that he enjoyed communicating with his friends and teachers, and conversing in English, and that his attitudes toward English classes gradually changed. Student D's confidence in his ability to communicate with the ALT in front of everyone during the unit from the second half of June through July was also seen in Student C, indicating that the experience of speaking English in front of everyone tended to increase their confidence. These two students were also the ones that the author paid more attention to, based on the results of the interim-questionnaire conducted in June. The reason is that they looked dejected and had a very negative attitude at the beginning of each English class, and it seemed difficult to motivate and build their confidence. However, from the middle of Unit 3, all of the students began to write about speaking and communicating in their reflections, indicating that although they felt English was difficult, the enjoyment of speaking and communicating with friends exceeded their awareness of the difficulty.

As with Student E and Student F, the number of students who became more confident in using English for conversation than at the beginning of the first semester has increased overall. On the other hand, in the final reflection of the first semester, there were some students who wrote "I couldn't do much". On the other hand, the students who wrote "I couldn't do so much." in the final review of the first semester checked almost all items on the CAN-DO list as "I can't do so much". However, when they wrote about what they would like to do next, they wrote "I want to be able to do it, and I want to do my best".

As described above, it can be said that the number of students who became confident in conversing in English through the English classes in the first semester increased as a whole. The most important factor was interaction with friends and teachers. This is because most of the students wrote in their reflections about the enjoyment they got from the interaction with their friends, and their thoughts can also be read from their daily comments. It is clear from this study that it is important to provide a friendly and approachable class that enables to students to have a relaxing and comfortable state of mind and body. In other words, it is thought that a place of safety, where one feels that one's message will be received and one's expression will be accepted, may have led to the desire to communicate, which in turn may have led to increased self-confidence. In addition, it was found that the teaching of reactions was an indispensable process in the formation of this place of reassurance.

Izumi (2017) suggests that the strategic ability to communicate physically using listening, confirmation, connecting words, and gestures when in trouble, and to communicate expressively with others while responding and responding back, are important constructs that should be cultivated at the elementary school level. In this study, the teaching of reactions, i.e., giving expressions of CS, stimulated interactions and increased the number of experiences that continued interaction. As a result, the first stage of CS instruction (motivation and anxiety reduction stage) was achieved, and this may have led to increased confidence in many of the students.

In addition, the fact that the author and other teachers, both in class and through the videos, have been showing the students how to use English to express themselves without fear of failure, has also contributed to the formation of a safe place for the students. Hirata (2012) also pointed out that many of the problems that cause communication problems are not due to individual abilities, but rather to the organization and system.

CONCLUSION

The results of the analysis showed that many of the students came to enjoy learning about others and communicating with others about themselves through a foreign language (Research question 1). In the pre-questionnaire, one student who had answered "I don't like English classes" stated in the final reflection that he originally disliked conversing, but now he wants to be able to speak fluently in English without looking at notes, indicating that some students' attitudes have changed significantly. Another student stated, "In 5th grade, I enjoy English classes and I feel more confident than before."

The background that elicited the desire to "challenge" and "communicate," regardless of success or failure, was probably due to the reassurance that what they said would be received, and that their thoughts and expressions would be accepted. When asked "What food do you like?" "Sounds nice!" reactions led to a sense of reassurance that they had been accepted, which in turn improved their motivation to communicate.

In order to enhance the desire to convey one's thoughts and ideas and express oneself through English classes, it was found that it is essential to provide a safe place where such thoughts can be elicited. This study also revealed that reaction guidance to accept what the other person communicates is an effective way to achieve this. The place of a safe place does not only refer to the visible classroom environment, teaching materials, and activities, but also includes the relationships among students and the way the teacher is. In order to create a safe place, it is important to first accept the other party, and such a place can be shown as a receptive place. In other words, this study suggests that fostering this accepting nature supports students' willingness and confidence to communicate (Research question 2).

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: List of Classes for the First Semester

	Content and Objectives of Each Class	●Unit goal ○Purposes
Mid-April ～ Mid-May	Unit 1 ● Can the whole class tell each other how to spell each other's names? ● Can the whole class ask each other about their favorite things? ● All class members can ask each other about the other's favorite color, sport, food, etc. ● The whole class can practice exchanging business cards. ● The whole class will be able to exchange business cards a lot.	●"Give your new teacher your business card and say hello!" ○Can tell what they like (colors, food, sports) and ask what others like. ○Can tell others how to spell his/her own name and can hear the spelling of others' names.
Mid-May ～ Mid-June	Unit 2 ● The whole class can say from April to December in English. ● The whole class can say and hear the dates. ● All class members can ask each other about birthdays and favorite things. ● All class members can make a birthday card that the recipient will be happy to receive. ● All class members can make a birthday card that the recipient will be happy to receive. ● The whole class can exchange birthday cards and listen to English speeches.	●"Let's send each other birthday cards and make everyone happy!" ○Can tell his/her own birthday and listen to the birthday of the other person. ○Can ask them what they want.
Mid-June ～ Mid-July	Unit 3 ● All members of the class can tell each other about their favorite subject. ● Can ask each other about what they want to study and what they want to do. ● All class members can ask each other about what they want to study and what they want to do. ● All class members can introduce the timetable. ● All class members will be able to tell what their favorite subject and day of the week is and why. ● All class members can think about introducing the timetable as a group. ● The whole class will be able to practice introducing the timetable.	●"Let's present our timetable to the rest of the school!" ○Can communicate to others about what they want to learn and the career they want to pursue. ○Can ask each other about their favorite subjects. ○Can introduce their own timetable as a group.

Appendix B: CAN-DO List for Students

What you can do	Check
Can read and hear upper and lower case letters of the alphabet.	
Can write upper and lower case letters of the alphabet.	
Can write your name in alphabetical characters.	
Can give simple greetings using English.	
Can speak English on their own initiative.	
Can communicate and hear numbers in English.	
Can listen to English spoken by friends and teachers and understand most of what is said.	
Can use English to tell people what you like (sports, food, colors, subjects) and ask them what they like.	
Can use English to tell someone your birthday or ask them when theirs is.	
Can introduce the timetable using English.	