Promoting English Speaking Confidence through Online Expanding Circle Communication

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Abstract. This study explores how expanding circle communication (i.e., intercultural communication between "non-native" speakers of English) boosts the confidence of Japanese EFL learners by developing a positive attitude toward their own English. Japanese, Chinese and Vietnamese university students participated in four sessions of online discussion. Since the idea of "English as an International Language" (EIL) is considered as a key to promote the learners' positive mindset for what had been considered "non-native" English varieties and boost the confidence in their own English, it was introduced in the reading activities in each session. After the completion of four intercultural communication sessions, reflective writings on two questions asking 1) their self-confidence in speaking English and 2) their attitude about EIL were collected. The result shows that the expanding circle communication brought the Japanese participants to raise their confidence in speaking English in relatively high percentage (73%) of all cases. Regarding the attitude on EIL, on the other hand, students were divided into two groups with the negative (43%) and positive (57%) attitude. In this study, therefore, the gap in the percentage between the participants' confidence in speaking English and attitude on EIL was examined and discussed.

1 Introduction

In line with the continued globalization, the demand for worldwide communication in English has been increasing. In the recent movement, the focus of EFL school education has been to nurture and produce global talents who will be able to play a major role in the global society. For that, it is considered necessary to have EFL learners acquire English communication skills used in a global society (e.g., negotiating in English). As its first step, improving their English speaking fluency needs to be achieved since they cannot negotiate with others in English without reaching a certain level of speaking fluency. Traditionally, the EFL school education in Japan has mostly focused on reading and grammar/vocabulary, however, the educational policy and curriculum began to change so that learners can have more opportunities to speak English in EFL classrooms. Regarding this, Nemoto reported "One major transformation will be an increase in classes, aimed at developing

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communicative English skills and international understanding, from 70 to 210 hours (1 hour = 45 minutes)" [1, pp. 1]. Certainly, increasing the hours to be exposed to English is a simple way to develop learners' speaking skills quantitatively, but it is also important to consider how to encourage them to boost their speaking skills qualitatively.

In this research, we focus on EFL learners' confidence as a potential element to positively influence their performance in L2 speaking. Coopersmith [2] defined self-confidence as a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes that individuals hold toward themselves. Based on the definition, Heyde [3] showed how low self-confidence can negatively affect the L2 performance when L2 learners consider themselves as a deficient and limited L2 user while high self-confidence can be positively correlated with their oral performance. Among different approaches used to raise L2 learners' speaking confidence, we examine and discuss how expanding circle communication (i.e., intercultural communication between L2 speakers sharing similar backgrounds with respect to their relationship to English) boosts their L2 speaking confidence to enhance their speaking skills.

2 Related Studies

2.1 Relation between Confidence and Anxiety

When it comes to learners' confidence, it is clear that L2 confidence is closely related to learners' anxiety; when learners' confidence level becomes higher, their anxiety will become less, or vice versa. According to Scovel, "Anxiety is a complex affective concept associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry" [4, pp. 134]. When the anxiety is originating from L2 learning, it is termed as L2 anxiety that causes the feelings of tension or nervousness centering on the two basic learning skills: listening and speaking [5, pp. 126]. Considering this, it is likely that lowering EFL learners' anxiety can lead to increasing their confidence level in speaking English.

2.2 Source of L2 Anxiety

To lower the level of L2 Anxiety, it is necessary to figure out the factors producing learners' anxiety. In regard to it, Hashemi [6] argued that the goal to adopt or achieve native-like pronunciation is a big source of anxiety for L2 learners. In EFL school education in Japan, the target model is 'Standard English', that is, American or British English [7, 8], and students are expected to speak English like Americans or British. This perfectionism way of thinking toward EFL school education, however, is one of the main factors causing students' L2 anxiety in EFL learning. Originally, it is hardly possible for Japanese EFL learners to speak English like native speakers of English from a sociolinguistic view; language is 'a mirror' to reflect the speaker's culture and identity, that is, people speak the language by expressing their cultures and identities. In relation to this, Niemeier [9] argued that language is not only a communication tool but also reflects the context, such as the speaker's own culture and identity. Further, Morimitsu [10] remarked that language comprises an important aspect of the culture and is deeply involved in the cogitation of people using the language. Since Japanese EFL learners are not Americans or British and do not have American or British background, there is almost no way for them to speak American or British English in a real sense. Thus, most of the learners cannot achieve the goal, suffering from the stress and anxiety and then eventually losing their L2 confidence.

2.3 EIL to Lower L2 Anxiety

As a strategy to lower the anxiety and change learners' mindset for English, English as an International Language (EIL) can play an important role in EFL classes. EIL was put forth by Smith, redefining the role of 'English as an International Auxiliary Language' (EIAL) that is "used by people of different nations to communicate with one another" [11, pp. 38]. He claimed ownership for all English users no matter whether they are native or non-native English speakers; "It is yours (no matter who you are) as much as it is mine (no matter who I am)" [11, pp. 39]. His remark gives us a message that ESL/EFL learners should stop mimicking 'Standard English' such as American and British English, but speak their own English by expressing their cultures and identities. In the case of Japanese EFL learners, they should speak Japanese English with the Japanese linguistic and cultural context. In fact, many scholars [12, 13, 14, 15] acknowledge many English varieties all over the world, including non-native English varieties, as "legitimate" Englishes (e.g., Singlish and Chinglish).

2.4 Introduction of EIL in English Classes

Introducing EIL in English classes can encourage EFL learners to practice English better in a way that they never approached before by understanding the concept and putting the idea into practice, in other words, producing their own English variety (Japanese English) with confidence. Concerning this, Lee et al. [16] implemented the videoconferencing-embedded classroom (VEC), which is an instructional instrument to raise the learner's perception toward EIL. The VEC is comprised of three different stages: 1) pre-videoconference tasks (11 weeks), 2) during-videoconference tasks (2 weeks), and 3) post-videoconference tasks (1 week). In the pre-VT stage, students read EIL-related articles and discussed the content through presentations for the preparation of the during-VT stage, where they discussed the topic and interacted with EIL scholars from the three-circle countries (USA, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Indonesia). In the final post-VT stage, the students wrote a reflective essay and gave a presentation based on the essay content. The activity is designed for the learners to input the concept of EIL mainly through reading EIL-related articles in the stage of the pre-videoconference task. As the result, the learners showed a positive attitude toward EIL, that is, their own English variety, which is a very important process to gain confidence in speaking Japanese English. Further, Ke and Suzuki [17] conducted online communication (L2 discussion) activity between Japanese and Taiwanese students as part of a course exchange activity. Although the concept of EIL was not introduced into the activity, the students were successful to practice the idea of EIL: speaking Japanese English. The result indicates the students' confidence in speaking English was increased after the activity, which proved that it is well-designed for the students to output their English variety and raise their confidence in speaking English.

2.5 Previous Research

In our previous study [18], we implemented intercultural communicative activities in an English class, the design of which is a combination of these two studies [16, 17] to investigate whether the Japanese EFL learners can boost their confidence in speaking English through both introducing EIL (input) and output of their English variety. (The details of the activity design are described in Section 3.3.) The participants are Japanese students (26) and international students (6 Chinese and 6 Vietnamese) at a Japanese university. The reason why the Chinese and Vietnamese students were selected as interlocutors for the Japanese students is based on the report of the empirical research by Ke and Suzuki; "they (the Japanese and Taiwanese students) were not so nervous using English because both sides were on equal

footings in terms of the relationship to English" [17, pp. 179]. In the case of our previous study, all the participants were also from expanding circle countries, in other words, their relationship to English is the same: expanding circle where English plays not a historical or governmental role, but where it is nevertheless widely used as a foreign language [19]. By choosing the interlocutors from these countries, it was expected that the Japanese students' anxiety would be reduced, and they could freely speak English with confidence. The result showed that all the Japanese students expressed a positive attitude toward the idea of EIL through the input of it, so it was successful to develop a positive mindset toward their English variety (Japanese English). On the other hand, however, only about half of them were able to raise their confidence in speaking English. That is to say, the other half could not increase the confidence even though they formed a positive attitude toward their own English. In the current study, therefore, the activity was redesigned to encourage EFL learners to develop a positive attitude toward Japanese English that can lead to the confidence in speaking English, that is, to gain confidence in speaking English while forming a positive attitude toward English variety.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were Japanese, Chinese, and Vietnamese college students majoring in computer science and engineering in Japan. Eighteen Japanese students (15 males and 3 females), and 6 Chinese (4 males and 2 females), and 6 Vietnamese (6 males) students participated. The Japanese participants' English proficiency ranged from novice to low-intermediate (the average of their TOEIC score was 380) while that of the Chinese and Vietnamese participants ranged from intermediate to advanced. Since the university requires international students to have an intermediate to advanced level of English capability and complete their degree with the English-only program, their English proficiency was higher than that of the Japanese students. Looking at the English-speaking fluency of some of the Chinese and Vietnamese participants, however, it was very similar to that of the Japanese participants.

3.2 Materials

In the current study, the following two kinds of materials: reading articles and reflective writing sheets were used.

3.2.1 Reading Materials

The articles were selected from the book titled *Intercultural English* [20]. This book is a collection of EIL-related casual readings for EFL learners designed to have them exposed to the idea of EIL through daily-life cross-cultural situations rather than to make them understand the concept of EIL itself. In fact, the term EIL does not appear in this book. The selected readings are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Reading materials.

	Reading titles
Reading 1	*Greeting across cultures*
Reading 2	*Which accent do you like?*
Reading 3	*Whose language is it?*
Reading 4	*Politeness, forms of address and culture*

3.2.2 Reflective Writing Sheet

After the whole activity, the Japanese participants worked on reflective writing as their final assignment. There were two questions; one was asking whether the participants gained confidence through the activities or not and the other was asking how positively or negatively the participants consider their own English variety. Through these two questions, it was expected to view the relation between the students' confidence and attitude toward their English variety.

3.3 Activity Design and Flow

The activity design was adapted from the one in our previous study [18] that is the combination of the two research studies [16, 17]. Each activity session was composed of the following three stages and was implemented four times over two weeks.

(1) Stage 1:
Participants input the idea of EIL through EIL-related casual readings written by EIL scholars in [20]. The content is based on cross-cultural daily-life situations so that the students can approach and discuss the topics easily and comfortably.

(2) Stage 2:
Participants introduce and practice (output) words, expressions, and accents of their English varieties (Japanese, Chinese, and Vietnamese English) through online group discussion. There are two topic questions for each article to discuss with their group members.

(3) Stage 3:
Participants exchange and share their ideas with the other group members during a presentation session. This stage aims to encourage the participants to obtain different ideas about the topics from other group members and also get exposed to different English varieties used by the international students in the other group.

Compared to our previous study, the activity in the current study was redesigned mainly in the reading content and communication style. Firstly, the reading content in the previous study was the summaries of EIL literature that help participants learn and understand the concept of EIL, whereas that of the current study was EIL-related casual readings that aim to give participants a chance to indirectly learn and think about EIL through the topics about

real-life intercultural situations as described above. Secondly, the group discussion in the previous study was face-to-face communication in the English classroom while that of the current study was online communication on Zoom. Actually, the group discussion was planned to be implemented face-to-face, but the plan was changed, and the group discussion was implemented online through Zoom due to COVID-19.

4 Results and Discussion

In total, 15 Japanese participants worked on the reflective writing assignment, answering Question 1 and 2. The results and the writing content are provided below.

4.1 Results of Confidence in Speaking English (Question 1)

Regarding Question 1, 11 out of 15 (73%) participants stated they were able to raise their confidence after the activity. The following are some of the participants' voices with the reasons for the confidence increase in the reflective writing.

> Student A:
> *After the discussion, I became able to speak with some confidence. The main reason is that <u>what I said has become familiar to foreign friends.</u> I had no experience of taking the time to talk to foreigners. At first, I was thinking about English syntax and it took me a long time to speak. <u>However, my international friends told me that I could use simple English words, which made me feel better, so I can speak comfortably. And being able to actually speak led to my greatest confidence.</u>*

> Student B:
> *After the discussion, I think I'm more confident about speaking English than before. Originally, I wasn't too reluctant to speak English, but I think this experience has given me even more confidence. <u>I think the most important thing to gain confidence in speaking English is to gain a lot of English-speaking experience and get a successful experience.</u> During the discussion, I worked on communicating everything from voice volume, voice color, and gestures, without worrying about grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary. As a result, I felt that my thoughts were conveyed. <u>The new successful experience has given me more confidence in speaking English than before.</u>*

> Student C:
> *I feel that my English conversation skills have improved through discussions. … The factor that made me speak is the surrounding environment. <u>In the first discussion, the people around me spoke good English, so I was overwhelmed by it and couldn't speak my opinion well. However, in the second and subsequent discussions, there were people with the same level of English as myself, so I was able to express my opinion better.</u>*

> Student D:
> *I think I was able to improve my own English conversation skills. … My impression is that most of the international students in the class are from Asia, and I was not accustomed to English in Asian countries. <u>However, I think I was able to convey my thoughts while adding gestures. I think the worst thing I can do is not talk. Therefore,</u>*

> *I was careful to use easy-to-understand words, subjects, and predicates because the grammar does not have to be accurate.*

As a reason for their raised confidence in speaking English, many of the participants attributed it to the opportunity to speak English. The participants indicated that they were not confident in speaking English before the activity because they did not have many opportunities to speak English in the first place. As they practiced speaking English, however, their confidence began to increase. Especially, when the opportunities turned into a successful experience, their confidence was raised dramatically. Additionally, it is likely that some of the participants practiced their English variety without worrying about speaking English in a 'correct' way to communicate with the Chinese and Vietnamese participants and realized that they could deliver a message to others in their own English at their current level. We believe it is a significant process of gaining confidence to accept and practice their English variety with a positive attitude toward it. Further, it appears that the Chinese and Vietnamese interlocutors with similar English proficiency made the participants feel relaxed and encouraged them to freely and proactively speak English in the group discussion.

On the other hand, 4 out of 15 (27%) participants could not gain confidence after the activity. The following are some of the participants' voices with the reasons provided in the reflective writing.

> Student E:
> *I think I didn't have much confidence in my English conversation ability compared to before the discussion. … However, when I asked a question about the answer or had a chat at the beginning of the discussion, I often couldn't hear the question or couldn't think of what to say, so I often moved on to the next topic without being able to answer.*

> Student F:
> *I am still not confident in my English conversation skills. The reason is that I never thought I was able to speak well in the discussion. Most of the time I can't express what I want to say in English. Vocabulary and smooth conversation are factors that I think have English conversation ability.*

These participants said that they could not catch up with the conversation due to their poor listening and speaking skills in English, so it seems that English communication in discussion style was still too difficult for them.

4.2 Results of Attitude toward English Variety (Question 2)

Concerning the results of Question 2, 8 out of 14 (57%) participants showed a positive attitude toward English variety. The following are the participants' voices with the reasons to be positive about the idea of EIL.

> Student A:
> *I agree with the idea to reflect your own linguistic and cultural values in your English. This is because culture and sense of value describe the speaker's life and personality. … In the global environment, it is better to understand various cultures rather than to follow one cultural context for communicating with people with different cultures and a sense of values.*

Student B:
*I think it is fine to express our own linguistic and cultural context in your English. …
I was afraid of speaking my English variety since I thought people would not
understand me well. <u>Actually, however, they tried to understand me and liked my
English accent, so I think the Japanese should bring their sense of value in their
English.</u>*

Student C:
*In my opinion, we should express our linguistic and cultural context in English in a
global environment. I'm sure English is spoken as a common language all over the
world, and people introduce and use words and expressions based on their cultural
and linguistic context. <u>I think it is better for us to proactively express them in a global
environment. Although people might not be able to understand our linguistic and
cultural context in the beginning, it will be a good chance for us to explain them and
promote the people's understanding about us.</u>*

Judging from their comments about English variety, many of the participants were able to
grasp the idea of EIL through the readings and their experience of speaking English in the
group discussion. Some of them claimed that language is a tool to express culture and
identity, people should express their cultures and identities even in English. By doing so, they
can understand each other and build a good and deep friendship based on the mutual
understanding. On top of that, the participants pointed out that people can exchange and share
new ideas reflected in different English varieties, which can be truly necessary to respect and
understand others with different cultures and identities in the global society.

On the other hand, 6 out of 14 (43%) participants showed a negative attitude toward
English variety. The following are reasons provided by students regarding their concerns
about the idea of EIL.

Student D:
*I think we should follow the linguistic and cultural context of 'Standard English'.
Since the sentence structure between English and Japanese is totally different, it
would be hard to communicate if the Japanese linguistic context is reflected in
English. … Further, our cultural context is not always understandable for others.
Given that, <u>learning the culture of English-speaking countries and following their
cultural and linguistic context makes communication smooth.</u>*

Student E:
*I think it is better to follow the cultural and linguistic context from English speaking
countries. <u>By unifying English, we conduct smooth communication in the language.
If everyone introduces and expresses their linguistic and cultural backgrounds in
English, the language would create a chaotic communicative environment.</u>*

Student F:
*I disagree with the idea to express your linguistic and cultural context in English.
<u>Non-native English speakers learn not only English words and grammar but also the
linguistic and cultural backgrounds of English-speaking countries. That is, all
English speakers share them and communicate with others comfortably.</u> Further,
understanding others' linguistic and cultural backgrounds would be waste of time.*

As for the main reason, many of the participants stressed the role of English as a common
language in the world; following the linguistic and cultural context of English-speaking

countries (i.e., speaking 'Standard English') enables us to communicate smoothly. They expressed their concerns about speaking "non-native" varieties of English as it might cause misunderstanding or miscommunication.

4.3 Comparing with the Results of our Previous Study

In the previous study, the reflective writing assignment was imposed on 8 Japanese participants. The result showed that 8 out of 8 (100%) participants were in favor of the idea of EIL and expressed a positive attitude toward their English variety (Japanese English). Regarding the question on their confidence level, however, 4 out of 8 (50%) participants were able to raise their confidence in speaking English.

Comparing the results of the reflective writings between the previous and current study, 50 percent (4 out of 8) and 73 percent (11 out of 15) of the participants became more confident in speaking English after the activity in the previous and present study, respectively. Such difference in the result can be attributed to the type of output. In the previous study, the participants discussed mostly whether they agree or disagree with the idea of EIL or how important it is for EFL learners to learn "Standard English"; that is, they focused more on their understanding of the concept of EIL on an abstract level without the feel of practicing "Japanese English". On the contrary, the participants in the present study practiced words, expressions, and accents of their English varieties by discussing questions such as "Introduce a common greeting in your country in English." or "Share some unique English borrowings and expressions in your native language with your group members.", in other words, they were encouraged to output their own English varieties. Hence, it is conceivable that the difference in the type of the output resulted in the difference in their English speaking confidence. In relation to this, Zhang claimed the importance of the process in SLA; "input is essential for language acquisition. In addition to input, it is also argued that interaction plays a crucial role in the process of learning L2. Output an — automatic output, to be exact is one pedagogical goal in learning L2 — " [21, pp. 91]. The theory can also be applied to the case of the previous and current studies; 'input' refers to reading the articles, and 'output' to produce the participants' English varieties. Further, interaction, a process between the 'input' and 'output', involves communicating with their group members. Given that, the mode of the output in the present study can be more directly associated with the input and powerful to promote EFL learners' confidence in speaking English.

In addition, another factor could have been the communication style. As stated, minimizing fears of making 'errors' is a key to lessen L2 learners' anxiety and stress, which helps the learners proactively produce performance and successfully achieve confidence. Although the activities in both previous and present studies were designed to realize the idea, it is considered that online communication through Zoom secured the learners' less anxiety and stress more than face-to-face communication in the classroom. In light of the reports of Jones [22] and Hashemi [6], the source of the anxiety and stress of L2 learners is to lose their faces in front of their classmates due to making 'errors'. Given that, it should be natural for the learners to be less anxious and stressed to speak English in the online communication where the listeners are limited to their group members.

On the other hand, 100 percent (8 out of 8) and 57 percent (8 out of 14) showed a positive attitude toward English variety in the previous and present study, respectively. Comparing the percentage of confidence increase (73%) in the present study, it seems it is not always the case that the participants who were successful in building English speaking confidence form a positive attitude toward their English variety. In contrast with that, all of the participants in the previous study were positive about their English variety. Considering the ratio of the participants who raised confidence is 50 percent, half of them agreed to the idea of EIL even though they could not become confident after the activity. Given the feature of the EIL

literature, the message of the readings is supposed to be powerful enough to convince the participants to positively shift their thought about and attitude toward English variety. Consequently, even the participants who did not succeed in improving their confidence favorably accepted the idea of EIL.

5 Conclusions

This study explored how expanding circle communication boosts the confidence of Japanese EFL learners by developing a positive attitude toward their own English. Given the results of both the current and previous study, the power of input from EIL literature is stronger than the one from EIL-related casual readings, which brought a higher percentage of the participants in the previous study to form a positive attitude toward Japanese English. In this study, the actual practice of proactively using Japanese English through the discussion topics focusing on expressions in different varieties of English (both "native" and "non-native") brought a higher percentage of the participants in the current study to raise their confidence in speaking English. Thus, it seems that the reading content and design can be a key factor to control the power of input and the quality of output so that EFL learners can increase the confidence in speaking English while forming a positive attitude toward the English varieties what had been traditionally considered "non-native" including their own English. Based on the results of these two studies, therefore, we will consider the content and design of the readings for the future study so that the learners can achieve both confidence gain in speaking English and formation of a positive attitude toward English variety. We believe our research is a stepping stone to develop Japanese EFL learners' English-speaking skills and produce global talents who will play a major role in the global society in the future.

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