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Practice Article

Navigating Change: Task-Based Approaches to Boosting Self-Confidence

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Abstract

In the post-pandemic era, the return to face-to-face (F2F) classes after two years of online teaching marks a significant shift. However, the challenge of fostering active participation and contribution within the classroom persists. This paper explores an English as a Second Language (ESL) oral communication class focused on presentations in front of peers and group discussions. This task-based approach was implemented consecutively for two years, initially conducted online and later in a face-to-face setting. An end-of-year anonymous survey was administered to collect data. A qualitative analysis of this data was performed, comparing outcomes to ascertain the achievement of our primary goal: building self-confidence among learners. The findings indicate that a well-structured class framework, complemented by explicit instructions and task repetition, significantly facilitated learners' ability to self-correct mistakes and engage at their individual pace. These critical elements, coupled with other factors linked to enhancing self-confidence in second language acquisition (SLA) through oral presentations and group discussions, will be thoroughly examined and discussed.

ポストパンデミック時代において、2年間のオンライン授業を経た後の対面授業への復帰は重要な転換点を迎えます。しかし、教室での積極的な参加と貢献を促進する課題は依然として存在しています。本論文では、仲間の前でプレゼンテーションやグループディスカッションに焦点を当てた、第二言語としての英語(ESL)の口頭コミュニケーションクラスを探求します。このタスクベースのアプローチは、最初にオンラインで、後に対面形式で、2年間連続して実施されました。年末に匿名のアンケートを実施してデータを収集しました。このデータの質的分析を行い、主な目標である学習者の自信を高めることが達成されたかどうかを比較しました。結果は、明確な指示とタスクの繰り返しによって補完されたよく構築されたクラスフレームワークが、学習者の間違いを自己修正する能力と、各自のペースでの関与を大幅に促進することを示しています。これらの重要な要素は、口頭プレゼンテーションとグループディスカッションを通じて第二言語習得(SLA)における自信を高めるために関連する他の要因とともに、徹底的に検討され、議論されます。

The Covid-19 pandemic forced a sudden switch to online learning. This disruption created many challenges for students and teachers, including a lack of participation and interaction. The pandemic disrupted normal life functions around the world, including learning and education (Greisamer, 2020). This new phenomenon created many hardships for students and teachers (Hobbs & Hawkins, 2020) having to deal with overloaded internet servers and a new style of learning. In Japanese universities, students are now expected to participate fully in online classes. This paper outlines a task-based oral communication course designed to build students' confidence in speaking and communicating with peers through presentations and group discussions, while examining feedback from learners through final class discussions and anonymous end-of-course surveys.

Theoretical Framework

Lack of confidence has been well-documented as a factor contributing to anxiety and reduced classroom participation (e.g., Brown, 2001; Derakshan & Eysenck, 2009; Clément, 1986; Selvi & Martin-Beltrán, 2016; Islam, 2017; Rastelli, 2018; Kung, 2019; Wang & Wu, 2020). Many studies highlight the need to build self-confidence (SC) during language acquisition as it significantly impacts student attitudes and awareness, which in turn determines L2 accomplishment (Clément et al., 1994). Clément's theory of linguistic self-confidence identifies linguistic self-confidence as a key factor in learning another language from a motivational perspective.

The Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) framework is an innovative approach that emphasizes using meaningful tasks and real communication skills. TBLT focuses less on explicit grammar and encourages students to engage in authentic language use, such as giving presentations and discussing topics of interest to them. As Skehan (2018), posits TBLT's focus on learner engagement and authentic language use helps bridge the gap between classroom practice and real-world language needs. This framework encourages active participation and collaboration, making it a student-centered approach that can enhance language acquisition.

TBLT is particularly effective in developing SC by engaging students in tasks that they are interested in and at their individual proficiency level. According to Long (2015), focusing on task completion rather than linguistic accuracy reduces anxiety and promotes a positive attitude toward learning. Tasks designed to align with students' interests and level can further motivate them and provide opportunities for risk-taking in a supportive environment. This supports Dörnyei and Ryan's (2015) research, which highlights the role of confidence and motivation in language learning success.

SC refers to a person's belief in their own abilities (Douglas, 2014). In the context of ESL, SC or self-esteem plays a crucial role as it empowers learners to achieve their L2 goals more effectively (Islam, 2017). It is shaped by external judgments, contributing to feelings of self-value and worth (Douglas, 2014). Completing tasks and receiving positive feedback can bolster this sense of assurance, thereby enhancing self-confidence (Bandura, 1993).

Research suggests that the mode of presentation via online or face to face can significantly influence SC among second language learners. Online presentations often provide a more relaxed environment, reducing anxiety and building confidence, especially for shy students. A study concerning English as a Foreign Language found that online presentations positively impacted shy students by lowering stress and anxiety levels. (Anjum M., Hanan Abdullah M. 2022).

There is a direct relationship between language learning ability and SC. Erol and Orth, (2011) suggest that self-esteem could be viewed as an assessment influenced by emotions of self-value. Research by Rubio (2007) and De Andrés & Arnold (2011) indicates that greater ability leads to more SC, and having confidence facilitates language acquisition. SC combines self-esteem (built from within) and self-efficacy (built by external support) (Neill, 2005).

As students complete tasks and receive feedback, their SC appears to grow (Kung, 2019). High SC is positively correlated with oral performance and is a crucial affective variable in effective second language acquisition. For example, Heyde (1979) found a positive correlation between SC and oral production performance among American college students. However, Japanese learners may often lack a framework that effectively promotes this behavior.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes using language in social interactions to improve proficiency (Vygotsky, 1987). Despite extensive research on SC in second language acquisition (Clément, R. 1986; Kung, 2019), few studies have investigated its development through task-based approaches during the transition from online to face-to-face classes. Additionally, existing literature often overlooks specific challenges faced by Japanese learners in oral communication tasks.

Oral presentation tasks can be used at all learning levels. Minematsu (2020) proposes that cognitive apprenticeships through peer interactions improve SC. By working in pairs, learners enhance articulation, comprehension, and memorization, which are useful for oral presentations.

Japanese learners often experience low self-confidence and high anxiety due to societal and second language anxiety (Greisamer, 2019). This anxiety leads to communication avoidance, shyness, and confusion Ur (1996) and Tsui (1996) found that anxiety and silence exacerbate each other, increasing anxiety. Additionally, Japanese cultural norms of humility and politeness cause students to underestimate their language abilities, hindering progress.

Language learning is unique for each learner, progressing at individual paces to reach personal goals. Rubio (2007) argues that unrealistic goals of native-like competence can negatively impact SC. Derakshan and Eysenck's (2009) Attentional Control Theory suggests that anxiety may influence cognitive processing efficiency, potentially lowering SC and making it more challenging for anxious learners to maintain focus (Greisamer, 2019). Participating in oral presentations (giving, listening, and critiquing) appears to have potential to boost learners' confidence and autonomy, which could help reduce anxiety. Clément (1986) posits that confidence alleviates language anxiety. Teachers play a crucial role in fostering an atmosphere of respect and value, rather than unrealistic comparisons to native speakers.

In the course described, tasks include giving presentations and discussing topics. Building SC involves creating presentations, while efficacy comes from the feedback and discussions that follow.

Design and Procedure

Participants in this class are first-year English majors at a public foreign language university in Kansai, enrolled in a 15-week course requiring two oral presentations. The first group was taught online via Zoom while the second was taught face-to-face. The semester is divided into four parts: learning how to present, delivering the first presentation, receiving feedback and making adjustments, and delivering the second presentation. Each class includes individual presentations followed by group discussions.

Presentation dates are assigned early to encourage students to take responsibility and set goals. The first group of presenters, selected randomly but ideally including confident students, is evaluated more leniently to reduce stress. After presentations, groups of five are formed for discussions, with presenters rotating between groups to gather diverse feedback. Time management is crucial, with 40 minutes allocated to presentations (10 minutes per student) and another 40 minutes for group discussions. Adjustments may be required based on the number of presenters, such as creating groups without a presenter to ensure everyone participates. Additional activities should be planned while considering these time constraints (Table 1).

Table 1

Parameters for the Oral Presentation

Category	Parameter	Details
Presentation	Time	5-minute speaking time, excluding media (video or audio).
	Flow	Smooth transitions and logical progression.
	Directions	Following given guidelines.
	Overall Comprehension	Clear understanding by the audience.
Content	Relevance	Content must relate to the chosen topic.
	Explanation	Adequate details and definition of key terms.
	Knowledge Demonstration	Understanding of the subject, including reasoning for topic selection and background information.
Oral	Pronunciation, Intonation, and Tone	Clear articulation, engaging voice, and appropriate modulation.
	Fluency and Pace	Smooth and coherent speech delivery.
	Articulation	Encourages clear expression using lips, jaw, tongue, and palate effectively (Rosenberg and Hirschberg, 2005).
	Feedback	Written or oral feedback to improve individual needs for the final presentation.
Visual	Props	Relevant slides, photos, or media to enhance visual appeal.
	PowerPoint	Recommended but not required; most students are familiar with its usage.
	Originality	Props should add a distinctive style and aid comprehension.
Memorization	Use of Memory Aids	Full memorization promotes natural flow but can cause gaps or pauses. Memory cards or notes are allowed for support.
	Evaluation of Aid Use	Teachers evaluate the effectiveness of using aids during the presentation.

Topic

Selecting a topic is crucial and needs to be explained clearly to students to prevent confusion and loss of confidence. Delays in choosing a topic can be due to poor communication, lack of confidence, or procrastination. If necessary, the teacher can assign the topic to initiate the process. The topic should be academic, relevant to current events, or related to the students' lives, such as politics, world affairs, environmental issues, technology, health, or social issues. Although this may initially cause anxiety, providing clear examples and guidance helps students understand their options. Students may choose the same topic as long as their work is original. Similar topics can enhance group discussions by providing background knowledge. Pre-presentation discussions allow students to brainstorm and articulate their ideas, reducing topic redundancy.

Feedback on Presentation

Once the parameters, themes, and dates are set and understood, presentations and discussion groups begin. During presentations, the teacher takes notes for feedback, and non-presenting students take notes and prepare questions. After each presentation, the teacher provides constructive criticism both orally (to the class) and in writing (privately) to the presenter. Verbal feedback focuses on procedures and the topic, helping to build self-confidence through task completion. Private written feedback, which is more critical during the first presentation, addresses style, pronunciation, and tone of voice to encourage improvement. For the second presentation, feedback is generally more positive to boost confidence. Students are encouraged to discuss their feedback in breakout rooms or after class.

Group Discussion

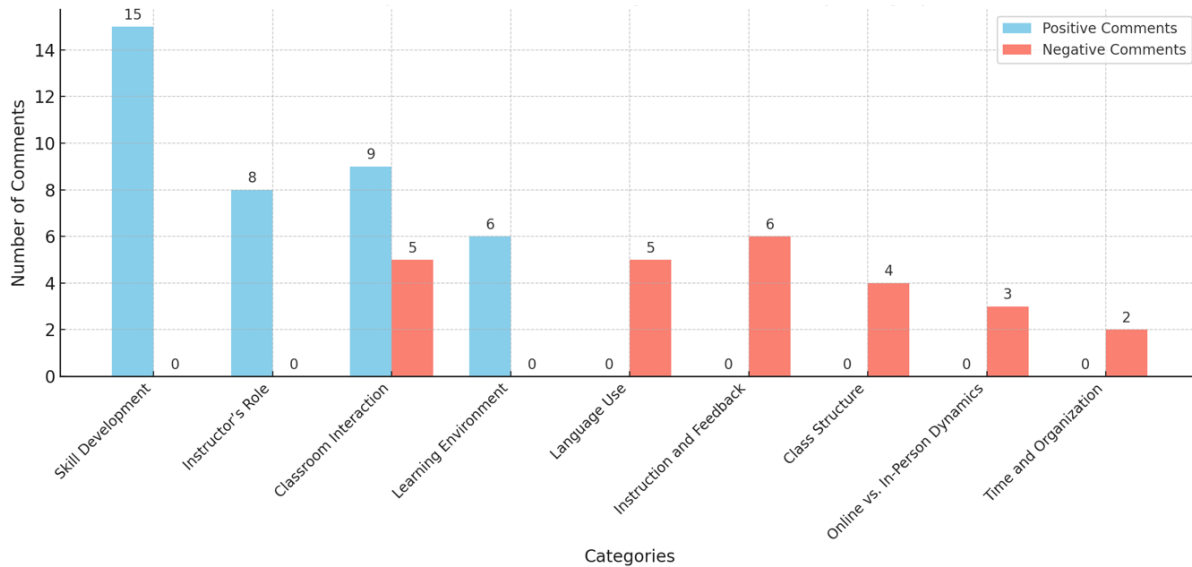
Following presentations, group discussions take place. In both online and face-to-face (F2F) settings, students are divided into groups, with presenters rotating between them. The goal is to encourage English use while avoiding undue pressure. Japanese may be used to support the conversation if it stalls, but maintaining interaction is the priority.

Feedback Results

This class has been taught both online and face-to-face (F2F) by the author. Feedback was gathered through an anonymous online survey at the end of the course. The survey included sections for participants to write comments under “Good points” and “What I would like to see improved.” Figure 1 provides a summary of positive and negative comments from the survey (see Figure 1). Some comments were in English, while most were in Japanese and translated into English. As the comments were anonymous and randomly collected, some students provided feedback in both categories. These responses are marked with a letter (e.g., A). See Appendix A for details.

Figure 1

Survey Results: Positive vs. Negative Comments by Category



Discussion

During the pandemic, teaching online significantly influenced self-confidence (SC) in students in both positive and negative ways. The virtual environment provided a safe, less intimidating place for students to practice and engage from their own space. As Dhawan (2020) posits, the flexibility and accessibility of online learning fostered autonomy and self-directed learning, empowering students to take control of their progress. However, the lack of face-to-face interaction and technical difficulties often hindered students' abilities to fully engage. Often students became frustrated, turned off their camera and stopped participating altogether.

SC is often seen as a counter to language anxiety. Clément (1986) defines SC as the combination of low anxiety and positive self-assessments. The idea is that the more confident a student is, the more they will participate in class. Speaking in front of others, even in one's first language, can be challenging. For Japanese students, doing this in a second language is even more daunting. This course aims to gradually reduce the pressure of public speaking by allowing learners to choose their own topics. This freedom helps boost SC in speaking, reduces anxiety, and, according to feedback, improves SC levels, thereby enhancing overall L2 proficiency.

As highlighted in the literature review, the relationship between ability and SC goes beyond mere positivity in the classroom. Fostering SC is key to creating a supportive environment that encourages learners to reach their full potential. Researching a topic provides the necessary background, vocabulary, and content to support learners' ability to engage in discussion. Being able to use the target language without anxiety in meaningful communication serves as a clear indicator of SC.

The teacher significantly impacts SC development and can also be a source of anxiety (Greisamer, 2020). Williams and Andrade (2008) found that teachers sometimes caused anxiety through inappropriate criticism and a lack of instructional support. However, as seen from student comments, teachers can positively influence both student performance and emotional well-being. From an online class survey, one student stated: “The teacher seemed to be able to see the personalities of each person. Many times I saw him relax a nervous person or give warm encouragement.” while another said: “I was glad that the atmosphere was relaxed and easy to participate in.” Therefore, teachers should maximize exposure to English in a low-anxiety environment, provide opportunities for success through personal and meaningful activities, and emphasize autonomous learning by drawing on learners' knowledge and resources.

Conclusion

This study addresses the previously identified gap in research on task-based approaches to SC development during the transition from online to face-to-face classes among Japanese ESL learners. The findings indicate that structured task repetition and constructive feedback effectively help students overcome these challenges. Positive survey responses and improved scores on subsequent presentations suggest that the class successfully enhanced students' SC. Additionally, simplifying the process of making effective and comprehensible presentations contributes to a more relaxed and learner-friendly environment, leading to greater engagement and participation. This step-by-step approach not only supports skill development but also encourages a willingness to communicate confidently throughout the semester, ultimately boosting SC.

Limitations / Further Research

While the claim that the course builds SC is supported by student feedback, the limited sample size and lack of quantitative data necessitate further validation. This paper opens avenues for deeper research, such as incorporating a more detailed peer review system. This could involve practicing drafts with different partners before presentations and using peer assessment forms afterward to take a more active role in the process. Ahangari, Rassekh-Alqol, and Hamed (2013) developed a suggest form tailored to students' needs, which could be adapted here. This form uses a five-point Likert scale, providing quantitative data for further research.

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Appendix A

First year of teaching course

Comments for the Good Points of the Course (Online during pandemic)

- There were a lot of presentations, and it was good for both listeners and presenters to gain experience. It is good for both the listeners and the presenters to gain experience.
- I am going to give a presentation, so it was good to learn how to prepare for it.
I think it was good that I could learn how to prepare and give a presentation.
- (A) I could use English making a presentation and in breakout room discussion.
- The teacher seemed to be able to see the personalities of each person. Many times I saw him relax a nervous person or give warm encouragement. I was glad to meet my classmates as it is difficult to meet face-to-face.
I was able to talk and communicate with my classmates online and in groups.
I think it's a great thing to be able to talk and communicate with your classmates in a pleasant way. I think it is due in part to the help of these teachers who help us on a daily basis.
- The class provided a good opportunity to make presentations in English, which was very effective.
- (B) I was glad that the atmosphere was relaxed and easy to participate in.
- I was able to interact with many people in groups, so I didn't feel lonely even in the Corona
I didn't feel lonely during the disaster.
- (C) I was able to acquire not only English skills, but also presentation and conversation skills.
- (D) I learned a lot of new things by listening to everyone's presentations.
- I love this class! I love to talk with classmates and Dr. G. in English.
- (E) I am nervous about presentations no matter how many times I do them, so this is a class where I can practice that.
- The breakout room is a great opportunity for students to improve their English skills.
You will be able to gain new knowledge in a variety of areas through your classmates' presentations. The classmates' presentations are a great way to gain new knowledge in various fields. The teacher also participates in the discussions, so I can listen to his opinions.
It's interesting to hear the teacher's opinions.

Improvements for the Course (Online during pandemic)

- I want to be able to communicate more in English with my classmates. Discussions between students are often in Japanese.
I wish I could speak more since this is a communication class.
- (A) It can't be helped but I couldn't meet my classmates face-to-face.
- (B) It was a communication class but I felt that not much instruction was given to improve conversation skills. The lines for presentations are usually prepared in advance. In addition, the discussions were left to each student's own English ability. I felt that there was not enough opportunity for students to improve their English.
- (D) It's a little hard to do presentations twice a semester. I think it would be better to have one presentation per half year.
- I understand that you are online, but I would like to see you and take your English course.

I wanted to have a solid English conversation class.

I would have liked to do that.

- (E) I wish I had more advice from the teacher on how to give a presentation and how to make slides that are easy to read.
- (F) I think it would be good if there were more things to learn from the teachers.
- I would like to learn more from the teacher.

Second year face to face (Post-pandemic)

Comments for the Good Points of the Course

- The teacher's story/speaking is interesting.
- Through the viewing of presentations, students will acquire the ability to listen to and understand English, and to share their own meaning in English in subsequent discussions. The teacher will provide supplementary explanations when you have difficulty understanding.
- It's all in English, so I can learn a lot.
- Although the content of the presentation was difficult to understand, the teacher explained the content in an easy-to-understand manner.
- There will be group work, so I have to actively speak English! I like that there is no pressure to be a "good" speaker, and I think it is a good way to learn English in a natural conversational context. Usually it is easy to speak what I am thinking, but I thought it was good that I could learn a lot by speaking out in English.
- He explained what I didn't understand in a way that was easy to understand.
- (B) The teacher spoke at a speed that I could hear and answered my questions in a respectful manner.
- The fact that he went around to each group and taught them about topics that were unclear. The opportunity to speak English with independence.
- I have a lot of time to think for myself, and I don't get bored doing it.
- (C) Being able to communicate using English.
- The English group discussion was good.
- It is easy to feel at home and speak up.
- Anyway, it's fun.
- The doctor is very kind and easy to talk to. I appreciate the direct intervention and guidance in group discussions.
- We have a lot of chances to discuss with other students.
- (E) Dr. G. spoke to the students, so we can express our opinion freely.
- There was lots of opportunities to talk to the instructor.
- The distribution of presentation and discussion was appropriate.
- An atmosphere is created in which it is easy to talk.
- I appreciated that he pronounced the words slowly and clearly in every class.

Comments for Improvements

- (A) I want the class to start on time.
- (B) The same was true for the other students. The students spoke English to each other, but since none of them had much experience in speaking English, they did not understand the presentation topics, so they often had to speak in Japanese.
- (C) I thought that the group work may need to be reconsidered if it is to be an effective oral communication practice in English due to the differences in the students' English levels (conversational ability).
- The number of students is too large for an English communication class. The group conversation is with Japanese students, so the conversation does not progress well in English.
- (D) Sometime I didn't understand what to talk in the discussion.
- Increase the number of topics for discussion.