Experiences of Japanese University Students’ Willingness to Speak English in Class: A Multiple Case Study

Grant L. Osterman

Abstract

English as a foreign language (EFL) in Japan is becoming a mandatory subject in all compulsory educational systems. Currently, the average Japanese student will study EFL for at least 8 years. Yet despite this period of time, Japanese continually score low on international English tests. Using a qualitative descriptive multiple case study method, the willingness to communicate (WTC) in a Japanese university setting was researched. Twelve student participants, ranging in age from 18 to 20, were interviewed in one Japanese university classroom. Data were gathered by classroom observations and post-class interviews. Data were analyzed by using qualitative software to aggregate the data into five themes. The results revealed that although the prior experiences with learning English has been mostly positive, students believe that the grammar-based learning has not been helpful in developing oral communication competency and what would help is an earlier start to oral English communication. Other findings revealed that the classroom environment has a severe impact on students’ WTC and the interaction with other students in the class. Recommendations for future research include gathering more case studies to compare and test students who have had an opportunity to start English learning earlier and the benefits of grammar-based learning.

Keywords

classroom environment, willingness to communicate, grammar-based learning, foreign-language learning, second language, English as a foreign language

Introduction

According to Japanese educational policy, students are required to start English-language instruction in the fifth grade (Hashimoto, 2011). Students must study English for a minimum of 8 years before they enter university (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology [MEXT], 2009). Yet, despite several years of enrollment in oral communication classes, many students continue to hesitate to communicate in English in university classrooms (Fushino, 2011). In fact, the English-speaking ability of people in Japan is one of the lowest in Asian countries (Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2011). The good news is that policies of the Japanese government represent attempts to address this lowered speaking and listening ability by increasing English instruction in elementary schools (Hashimoto, 2011; McKenzie, 2008).

Current Japanese Research on WTC

Although much Japanese research started with Yashima’s (2002) research with Japanese students’ international posture, current researchers focus on WTC and the factors that influence students’ oral English discourse. For example,

Literature Review

Several quantitative research studies have been conducted on the topic of willingness to communicate (WTC; Hodis, Bardhan, & Hodis, 2010; Lu & Hsu, 2008; MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Williams & Andrade, 2008; Yashima, 2002) as well as mixed-methods studies (Léger & Storch, 2009). There have also been some qualitative studies on the topic (MacIntyre, Burns, & Jessome, 2011; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Matsuoka & Rahimi, 2010; Peng, 2012). However, the actual voices of students, in regard to their prior learning experiences, are needed to help ascertain WTC problems. Therefore, this introductory literature review looks at WTC and what prior researchers have been discovering related to learning English as a foreign language (EFL).

Corresponding Author:

Grant L. Osterman, Okinawa University, 555, Kokuba, Naha-shi, Okinawa 902-8521 Japan.
Email: grantosterman@yahoo.com

1Okinawa University, Japan

Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License (http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access page (http://www.uk.sagepub.com/aboutus/openaccess.htm).
Nakatani (2010) explored the specific communication strategies of 62 Japanese college students. Results indicated that two main strategies enhance communicative ability: maintaining discourse and negotiation of meaning. For WTC, the effort to maintain discourse is important in that the student will need to actively participate in the communication activity for discourse to be maintained (Nakatani, 2010).

In other research, Provenzano and Yue (2011) focused on speaking homework to help facilitate the opportunity to use English. The results of 114 students’ opinions in a survey indicated that students believed the extra practice helped with class discourse. Specifically, it was the actual speaking that led to more confidence and English fluency. This was similar to Shawer’s (2010) qualitative case study where instructors who used communicative strategies had the most success in developing students’ language ability.

In addition, the results of Fushino’s (2011) research with Japanese university students using cooperative learning strategies indicated that students’ English experience had become a real means of communication. This hands-on experience helped them understand the practical usage of language outside the classroom. However, Watanabe (2013) found that high school students’ English ability did not improve after 3 years of studying. Here too, these students were afforded the opportunity to use English with a native English speaker but failed to improve their overall English ability.

The findings of research by Yoshida et al. (2011) also indicated that just because students are enjoying the lessons that does not necessarily mean they are learning. Specifically, Yoshida et al. (2011) reported that fundamental English learning in elementary and junior high schools does not have the same goal. In elementary English, the goal is meaning-focused and in junior high school, the goal is more form-focused.

**Grammar-Focus Learning**

A combination of grammar-focused learning and communicative speaking exercises are arguably the best approach to learning a language. However, the grammar-translation method of instruction, common in the current Japanese education system, is one of the most demotivating factors for students (Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009; Kikuchi, 2009). Furthermore, other researchers have shown that once students start the grammar-based junior high school learning, 57% say that they did not like English overall and that grammar was the least favorite thing about learning English (Benesse, 2009). This finding mirrored research with Japanese high school students by Kikuchi and Browne (2009).

**Factors That Affect WTC**

The main factors that affect WTC that researchers are discovering are learner beliefs (Mercer, 2011; Trinder, 2013), international posture (Yashima, 2002), classroom environment (Peng & Woodrow, 2010), silence (Harumi, 2011), motivational strategy (Sugita & Takeuchi, 2010), communication confidence (Fushino, 2010), and communication apprehension (Matsuoka & Rahimi, 2010; McCroskey, 1997). Other researchers too have pointed to motivation (Carreira, 2011; Sugita & Takeuchi, 2010; Zhao, 2012; Zhou, 2012) and perceived competence as key points in second language (L2) acquisition (Fushino, 2010; Knell & Chi, 2012; Lockley & Farrell, 2011; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Zhong, 2013). However, most of these studies were conducted via quantitative research and without actual student voices. Still needed is a discussion with actual students about prior English learning lessons and how better to improve oral English instruction.

**Early Start to English Learning**

Learning a new language takes many years of practice, so getting an early start will definitely help later in life. However, there is some debate as to when is the best time to start learning a foreign language. There is also some debate as to the benefit on proficiency with an early start in elementary school compared with waiting until junior high school. Many researchers believe an early start does help with overall ability (Dierkes, 2010; Goorhuis-Brouwer & De Bot, 2010; Hu & McKay, 2012; Huang, 2011).

These views were in contrast to Larson-Hall’s (2008) study where an early start had little effect on proficiency. However, more recent research by Huang (2011) indicated that those students who are afforded more opportunity to communicate in class at a young age will be motivated to use the target language and develop a greater level of active verbal communication in both quality and quantity. The debate as to an early start with English lessons may seem like an easy issue, but there are researchers on both sides of the issues with empirical data to back up their positions.

For example, an early start to learning English in public elementary schools is not without opposition. Torikai (2005) reported that the Japanese education system needs to focus on Japanese, so that the citizens of Japan are more capable of communication. That is not to say English is not important but rather that English can wait to be studied until later grades of junior high school or even college. Larson-Hall (2008) further reported in her research that an early start helped students with phonemic ability but not with their morphosyntactic understanding. This means that basically students who start early have a better pronunciation of English words but not necessarily a greater understanding of how words are formed to produce language. Therefore, when the input is small, such as a few hours a week, researchers are still far from understanding the benefits of an early starting age.

**Research Method**

A qualitative multiple case study was used to investigate and describe Japanese university students’ participation...
experiences in oral English classes and how prior personal experiences affect the students’ current WTC. Data were gathered over the course of approximately 1 month. Each student represented one case of this multiple case study. All students were selected from a single class at the selected university. The collection of data from the willingness to communicate questionnaire (WTCQ), the direct classroom observations, and two interviews enabled data triangulation (Yin, 2009). The multiple methods of data collection were framed within the single topic of the willingness of students to engage in English-language conversation, either with the foreign-language teacher or with other students.

Population

The purposeful sample was chosen from a private university in southern Japan to establish a manageable scope of the study. The criteria for selecting this university were based on three basic considerations. First, the university had to have mandatory oral English classes for freshmen, with a native English speaker as instructor. Second, the university needed to be close enough to the researcher’s house to allow for daily exposure to students to conduct classroom observation and interviews. Finally, low motivation and low English ability were desired due to the nature of the study exploring a students’ WTC.

Sample

A non-random convenience sample for this case study research was used to observe and ask 12 Japanese university students their experiences in speaking English in class. There were 12 possible regular oral English classes of which one was chosen. Students only need to be enrolled in good standing with the said university and be a Japanese national. However, of the 35 students in the class only 14 were originally selected to participate based on their score on the WTCQ. In this study, the original number of 14 participants was used to allow for possible dropouts and still maintain a large enough sample number to use replication. The final number of 12 was reached because in the class of 35 students, 12 seemed the most motivated to complete the research study and also had higher scores on the initial WTCQ. The final result was 8 men and 4 women participants.

Materials/Instruments

The research instruments that were used on this site were an initial WTCQ (see Appendices A & B), six 1-hr in-class observations (see Appendix C), and two 60-min semistructured interviews for each participant (see Appendices D & E). There were 12 students from the class that compromised 12 units that were analyzed over the course of a 1-month period. After the 1-hr direct classroom observations, there were also 1-hr follow-up interviews where specific questions were asked related to oral communication in the classroom. To achieve this goal, two research questions were used:

Research Question 1: What are Japanese university students’ experiences with oral communication in English communication classes?

Research Question 2: How do Japanese university students describe the influence of their experiences with oral communication in English communication classes on their WTC in these classes?

There were also hand-written notes from both the interviews and classroom observations. The purpose of these notes was to capture the overall feel and emotional atmosphere of the classroom that was difficult to capture by audio-recorders only. However, audio transcripts were used and verified by student participants for accuracy right after their interview. As a data gathering shared experience between the researcher and students, it was important to keep the emotional atmosphere conducive to open conversation. All data were then archived to ensure accuracy later. Furthermore, to protect participants’ privacy, names were changed.

The initial WTCQ was used to help establish current students’ willingness to speak English in class. This was important to ascertain the connection between what Japanese university students say their WTC is and how they actually act in the oral language classroom (Navarro & Thornton, 2011). For this initial WTCQ, reliability was examined by one of the original authors and it showed considerable reliability across different age groups and populations (McCroskey, 1992). The scale is a 20-item, probability-estimate scale with 8 of the items as fillers and 12 scored as part of the scale. This allowed for both a solid approximation of students current WTC or their unwillingness to communicate. The reliability for the WTC scale was set at a modal estimate of .92 for both the United States and other cultures (McCroskey, 1992). Therefore for this case study, it was easy to rely on the scale to accurately predict a students’ WTC. The scale was translated by a Japanese teacher for students to better understand what was being asked.

For the classroom observations measurement, six in-class viewings were chosen to see how students were interacting in the actual EFL classroom. The method used was to go directly into the classroom and observe the six oral English communication lessons for 1 hr. The observations were then used to see firsthand how students were interacting.

Data Collection, Processing, and Analysis

Before the study started, an initial questionnaire was used to obtain a purposeful sample. After the participants were selected and had signed consent forms, two individual interviews with each student participant were scheduled. The first interview was conducted within the first few weeks and before all classroom observations were conducted. The
second interview came after all six classroom observations were finished to allow more information from which to discuss students’ experiences. In each interview, 30 structured questions and some follow-up questions were asked for clarification.

Initially, no preconceived codes were utilized. Codes were created and garnered as the data poured in and the qualitative data deductively sorted into smaller meaningful sections. These sections were then subdivided as the data were read again and again repeatedly to further codify the data. Using qualitative software aided in the analysis of a vast amount of data by allowing for cross-references and looking for similarities in the data. Keywords were identified to help with coding of specific segments of information.

Data were analyzed by means of an inductive reasoning process. The level of WTC in English was examined without preexisting expectations. In this way, the participants were able to share their experiences in an exploratory nonjudgmental atmosphere, so that the research questions of this study could be addressed. Also, data were analyzed by clustering and grouping important statements into meaning. The clusters and groups were then used to help understand the experiences of Japanese university students with WTC.

Assumptions
There were a few methodological assumptions from this study. First, the instruments used in this study best reached the goals and problem under study. Specifically, an extensive amount of time was spent watching and interviewing students in the natural setting of EFL classrooms to be able to reconstruct (Thomas, 2011), and understand, the students’ experiences with WTC. Second, it was assumed that by using the personal nature of the case study method participants would be more willing to communicate with the interviewer in one-on-one interviews. Also understood was that the answers to the interview questions would be free from pressure and answered honestly. Every possible strategy was used to create positive relations with respondents: using the participants’ native language in the interviews, and creating an environment that was relaxing and conducive to open communication (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010).

Results
The results indicated that current university oral English courses are not what students believed were necessary for learning English. Many students stated that they believe actual communication is important and not grammar-intensive instruction. This was similar to results from the literature review where researchers reported that only 6% of students in their study believe that prior English-language instruction aided in oral communication ability (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). Prior to this study, not much was known about actual student interactions or their opinions about oral communication in the EFL classroom. This section is an evaluation of these findings as they pertain to WTC and the two research questions.

What was also revealed was that the overall experiences of these Japanese college students indicated that learning English was a positive experience. Students mentioned that they did not like the grammar-focused style of learning, but even that was better than not having the opportunity to study English. This opinion was further expressed with the desire to start learning English earlier in their academic experience to enhance current proficiency.

The findings in this study also revealed that students have not had significant opportunity to practice the use of English with other students. The fact that 66% of the students in this study did not believe that their prior English learning experience was meaningful was similar to research by Mack (2012), whereby students also complained that they felt uncomfortable with other students because they had not had much experience speaking in English. Here too, semistructured interviews were employed to ask students about prior experiences. The key point was that policy makers should take an interest in current student voices. Students postulated that a grammar-based pedagogy alone did not prepare them for future oral communication (Mack, 2012).

Furthermore, the environment played a major role in why students did not actively engage in English communication in class or with each other. As with other researchers, environmental factors that affect students’ WTC were discussed. Specifically for classroom environment, the shared feeling in the classroom about the learning mood was revealed (Peng, 2012). However, not much has been mentioned about why the environment played such a large role in WTC. The results of this study revealed a few possible reasons despite the obvious warm and friendly atmosphere.

First, many students do not know how to approach other students and start a normal conversation in their native language, much less a foreign one. This was apparent with comments such as being the only one trying to use English as awkward or other students did not seem to want to speak English. Also, the students in the class did not know other students’ names or anything about them so using English seemed unnecessary. On average, the students in this case study only knew a few other students in the class of more than 30 learners. However, with the help of the instructor, almost all the students did the speaking exercises when the instructor facilitated the dialog with them. In contrast, as soon as the instructor left to help other students and the group was on their own, all students ceased speaking and did not actively try to use the target English language.

Second, the students in this study mentioned that they have not used this type of interaction before, so it was unusual and unknown. Classroom observations continually showed this lack of prior experience by students only using Japanese and speaking about topics completely unrelated to the task at hand. This lack of experience was a major factor between what foreign-language teachers believe and the reality in the classroom (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). The
students mentioned that part of being uncomfortable with the activities was that they have low English ability and were not sure how to do the activities.

Third, most students were not as active and participating as they should be, so this overall lack of interest attitude seemed to affect the atmosphere of the classroom and lower WTC. Peng (2012) also listed classroom atmosphere as a major factor that inhibits Chinese university students’ WTC. The emotional climate of the classroom, or the overall feeling felt, was very important in whether students would actively participate or not (Peng, 2012).

The Japanese students in this study had a negative understanding about the overall classroom atmosphere before even starting class. To exacerbate this preconceived belief, the students’ actions in class reinforced this negative belief (sleeping, using Japanese, or not paying attention). These negative nuances were open and honest and gave a good view as to how the participants in this study felt about using a foreign language to practice conversation with other students.

The final theme revealed was that early exposure and speaking practice in English would improve students current WTC. Predominately, students revealed that they started learning English in the first year of middle school. In fact, only four students started learning English prior to the sixth grade. When asked about prior learning experiences, the remaining 66% of participants mentioned negative aspects about learning English such as it was difficult, not fun, or that they felt uncomfortable using English.

When asked in the second interview about how an early start in speaking English would affect current WTC, students reported that an early start would help with pronunciation or make learning fun, and thus increase confidence if only because of more exposure to the target English language. Only one student stated that an early start would not be good because she would not remember much from that time. Overall, the consensus was that an early start would definitely improve current WTC. An advantage of starting English lessons early was also a finding in Goorhuis-Brouwer and De Bot’s (2010) study where Dutch 4-year-olds showed an advantage of learning English early. Furthermore, there were no negative results for first language (L1) proficiency due to an early L2 start as is one argument for those not recommending English in elementary schools (Torikai, 2005).

Finally, reported below are the five themes that emerged using inductive codes related to two research questions. Specifically, the first research question addressed students’ prior experience with learning English. The second research question addressed how students described the influence of prior classes on current WTC.

Overall Good Experience With Learning English

The first theme that emerged by aggregating the data was that students reported that their experience has been beneficial, but the method of learning could have been better. This was an unexpected finding. Specifically, students reported that the grammar-focused style of learning was counterproductive to speaking ability and one’s WTC.

All 12 students said that their prior experience learning English was actually not a waste of time and that it had benefit to their lives. This was despite the fact that four students openly stated that they did not like speaking English or have lost interest in English due to prior pedagogy. Table 1 shows

| Students | Grade started | Overall experience                           |
|----------|---------------|---------------------------------------------|
| HT       | Seventh       | Felt grammar was forced on him              |
| CG       | Sixth         | Grammar-focused learning and says she does not know English. However, she is looking forward to a new start in university. |
| NM       | Third         | Likes English and sees the importance of it.|
| HN       | Seventh       | He doesn’t like English. He is better at understanding, but struggles with responding and putting words together. |
| TN       | Fourth        | He wants to be able to speak English, but currently cannot speak well. |
| SN       | Fourth        | Does not remember much about prior experiences and does not like to speak. Prior learning predominately grammar focus learning. |
| RC       | Sixth         | In the past, his teachers would focus only on the curriculum and because of this he was left behind. |
| YT       | Seventh       | Grammar-focused learning and because of this focus he lost interest in English. He blames the lack of interest in English as why he is not good at it now. |
| HE       | Sixth         | He mentioned that his prior learning experience with English was not fun and that he hoped university classes would be fun. |
| TG       | First         | He enjoys speaking and therefore did not like JHS/HS English classes. |
| AN       | Sixth         | Prior experience was difficult in that the English was hard and the instructor taught the targets to everyone without much one-on-one help. |
| NO       | Seventh       | Very little exposure to English in HS, but wants to learn English. |

Note. JHS = junior high school; HS = high school.
students positive and negative comments about prior learning experiences.

Of all the students, only two had slightly negative comments about whether or not the prior experience of learning English was good. AN said she “guesses it has been good” and YT said that it was “good and bad” and then finally stated, “I guess it was normal.” The other participants (83%) had more positive comments about prior learning experiences with English, such as “good so far,” “good experience,” and “great.” Other pertinent comments were expressed by CG such as “good so far, but looking forward to university English classes” and by HN that he had a good experience, but that he “wished he could have started earlier.” The student with the highest initial WTCQ score expressed that talking to native English speakers is “a good thing,” but also felt that the English language was “forced” on him.

When asked directly about prior learning experiences, one comment from a male student was of particular interest. This student was the only student in the study to have started learning English in the first grade of elementary. He believed that although the current class was not the best for practicing oral English skills, his overall experience with learning English had been “great.” Another student also had a similar observation when he said, “Had I learned English in elementary school I believe my current [educational] path and experience in learning English would have been much smoother.”

Finally, the participants’ reported that their prior experience with learning English could have been improved by incorporating more fun into the prior lessons. One student stated that he felt the learning process was forced on him. Other students reported that they look forward to starting new with university classes by getting away from their prior grammar-focused pedagogy. Still other students reported that if studying English was interesting when they first started then they would have not lost interest and would now like English. It was HT that summed up the process the best by saying, “If you were able to speak English then learning would feel more fun.”

**Prior Grammar Style Rote Learning Experience Did Not Improve WTC**

The second theme that arose from the interviews and classroom observations was that the majority of students reported that the grammar-focused style of learning, which is common in Japan, did not motivate them to either learn or speak English. The results revealed that not only do Japanese college students believe that studying grammar is not beneficial to their overall English proficiency, they also believe that the focus on grammar in prior learning has hampered their current ability with oral communication. Eight students, or 66%, reported that after a minimum of 6 years of learning EFL, they did not learn much and because of this experience they did not like English. When students were directly asked in the interview what would help them improve their English ability, not one student reported that studying more grammar would help.

Another 42% also reported that speaking English to native English speakers, rather than learning grammar, would be a good way to improve their ability. One student extended this concern by reporting that he often “worried about speaking incorrect English, [and that] prevents [him] from speaking English more actively.” In the follow-up second interview, this student expanded his comments to include, “There’s no point being able to write English if I can’t speak it.” TN also said, “Actual practice of speaking English is better than learning grammar.”

What was further revealed by this study was that students do not enjoy, nor do they think it necessary, to study grammar so intensely for all their English lessons. Rather students postulated that more communicative instruction would be more useful to their lives. Students also remarked that as an alternative to grammar-based instruction, it would be much more beneficial to study English that is actually practical in their daily lives. This was evident by comments from NM such as “real life communication begins from speaking” or RC who postulated that “there is no point in being able to write English if he cannot speak it.”

**Environment Plays a Major Role in a Student’s WTC**

In reviewing the data, the focus was on the early experiences of students to see if those experiences were affecting current students’ WTC. What was found was that current experiences of rote style learning and grammar-focused studies did not help students articulate in the foreign language, but rather, created an environment that is not conducive to spontaneous communication and lacked the opportunity for oral practice.

Every student mentioned that the environment played a major role in their WTC. For example, CG stated, “I will speak to my friends, but not others” and HE mentioned that when the “classroom is quiet,” it prevents him from talking. Five other students mentioned that the environment and other students’ attitude are crucial in creating an atmosphere that is conducive to speaking. However, important to note was that although the environment was mentioned as important, many students also remarked about how their ability and personality affected their WTC. Several students commented their “English ability is not good” or they “do not know English.” As far as personality was noted, participants also reported that they were shy, introvert, embarrassed, and uncomfortable with speaking English.

**Students’ WTC Is Low With Other Students**

The fourth theme that emerged while reviewing data was that students did not like to use English with other students and
the effect was a lower WTC with other students. In the current study, many participants reported that using English with the native English instructor was natural and easy, but that their WTC was lower with other Japanese students. Several students commented that talking in English to other students seemed “strange, tiring, unnecessary, [and] unsure.”

In the classroom observations, it was apparent that students felt uncomfortable with other students. This was demonstrated by them using their cellphone instead of engaging other students in conversation, or doing the book work themselves and not practicing the TL with their assigned partner. Students were observed many times in group activities, wherein they would simply sit in the group and seemingly ignore the other group members. When asked later why, the common response was that no one initiates the conversation and therefore, communication does not happen.

The low WTC with other students was obvious by HN’s comment, “I do well with other students who try.” When further asked what that means he said, “If the other students tried to speak English, then I, too, will try.” However, most students did not try to speak English. In fact, they often felt that by trying to speak English with other students, they would be pressuring them to do something they did not want to do. This comment was shared by TG when he said, “Putting pressure on the other student kills the conversation.” TN extended the issue by saying, “Not speaking to others [strangers] is unique to Japanese.”

The interview results indicated that although the students had studied English for over 6 years, they lacked knowledge of how to articulate when given the chance. HN stated that he would try to use English, but was not sure whether or not his English would be understood by the other person. He further stated that this feeling then prevented him from trying further. HT also stated that he did not know what to say. NM listed not understanding as a reason why she did not try to speak English. RC mentioned that not being able to pronounce English words prevented him from trying. SN postulated that being shy and embarrassed prevented him from speaking. TG, the student with the most prior experience speaking English, stated that being the only one to speak English in a class where everyone else was speaking Japanese was awkward. TN listed being embarrassed as his main reason for not speaking. Finally, YT stated that the reason why he did not speak English was because he did not know it.

**Early English Practice Would Improve Current WTC**

This final theme was the most pronounced of all others. Every student said that they would have benefited from early exposure to the English language. Data revealed that all the students believed that if they had started English early, their current lack of WTC would not be as pronounced. These data were used to answer the second research question and how prior experience affects current WTC. Predominately, 99% said that given the chance to learn English in the first grade of elementary school would have greatly enhanced their current language acquisition. Only one student felt that an early start might not have made a difference. However, she did say that starting at a younger age would make participating easier because she would not worry so much about making mistakes. Several other students were recorded saying that if they had started early in elementary school, they would not have been embarrassed to use English and now EFL would be more fun.

Furthermore, comments such as starting earlier would make “absorbing English easier” and what the students learned then would “stick with them” were recorded. The most poignant comment was from HN when he mentioned that, by learning English early and having fun with the English language, it would instill that language learning can be fun and encourage further development. If an early interest was achieved, then this “would enable us [students] to do well in university.”

Of special interest might also be HE’s comment because he did not have much prior practice with oral communication and believed that the language did not stick with him. He went on to say, “You won’t remember it [English] unless you speak it.” Also of interest were SN’s comment, “Interested in learning English, but can’t speak it” or TG’s comment, “Prior experiences create a foundation, so I’m glad to have had the opportunity.” Finally, TN commented that he did not think he “picked up much.”

Students reported that if they had been able to start learning English in the first grade of elementary school, then their current English understanding and WTC would probably be much better. The main reason given was that by starting compulsory English grammar classes in the seventh grade, many students grew to hate the English language and lost motivation. Furthermore, in support of the findings for an early starting age to English conversation are the meticulous voices of students in this research project. Students did not state that an early start to learning English would necessarily improve English performance, but they did say that an early start would help improve confidence and motivation to learn English, and thus make the process more enjoyable.

**Recommendations**

The first recommendation is that future researchers should be careful not to apply the results of this study directly to all Japanese. Rather, future researchers should use these results as an impetus to either continue the study method, or duplicate with either quantitative or mixed-methods studies. Research using actual student voices through direct interviews is also recommended to find out if current policy is what students believe is best for them. This study did take actual student voices in two interviews with the results indicating that students believe more communicative instruction would best serve their needs. Therefore, the findings of this
study add to current literature about the WTC of Japanese university students by exposing current pedagogy and the way students view oral English instruction.

The second recommendation is for more oral communication practice at the university level. Much of the current style of teaching English needs to be rethought. Many students reported that the pedagogy was the main problem with their current lack of WTC. Without a more careful and complete understanding of current compulsory pedagogy, future students might also lack in the important skill of oral communication in a foreign language. The main issue is that students need to focus more on oral communication skills and less on the grammar they articulated as the cause of their apathy toward the English language. A more balanced approach with oral English exposure in early elementary and grammar-focused instruction introduced later is what students believe would be most beneficial to their future.

The third recommendation is that more case studies be conducted with other university students throughout Japan. As previously noted, most current research into Japanese WTC focuses on quantitative methods. Although the quantitative method is vital, a more balanced approach to research is important to maintain a holistic view of current students’ WTC and oral communication. It is also important to note that, as this study revealed, students idea of important lessons and current policy might not be the same.

The final recommendation is that young Japanese students be exposed to oral English conversation as soon as possible. Students in this study mentioned that an earlier start would have greatly improved their current speaking ability. Particularly, additional practice with other students in meaningful oral dialogs in elementary school English classes would help Japanese students later when university professors expect, and grade, oral dialogs in class. Not only would early exposure to oral English activities help limit a culture misunderstanding where foreign instructors believe that students are not willing to communicate because of lack of desire or need (Rivers, 2010), but early English-language learning would also add more years of communicative practice that should help with language acquisition (Rivers, 2012).

One of the key missing parts to prior research was actual students’ interviews and opinions. Not only was that the impetus for this study, but now future researchers can have actual students’ voices to add to the literature.

The five themes identified in this study are only the start of recognizing how prior experiences have been affecting current university students’ WTC. The students mentioned that overall prior experience has been positive, but there still are areas that need improvement. These five themes were also intertwined in that, if one would improve, this improvement would affect other areas. Specifically, by reducing current grammar-focused learning and using a more communicative approach early in oral English instruction, not only would students be more willing to interact using the target English language, but the overall classroom environment would also improve and be more conducive to WTC.

The four recommendations based on the outcomes of this study have also been discussed in the context of improving future students’ learning experience, so as to enhance WTC. The results of this study cannot be applied to all students in Japan. There are, however, some ways to help increase WTC in the university setting. Policy change is perhaps the first step university administration officials will want to do to encourage active participation in the classrooms.

A change in policy that reflects a more communicative classroom will take time and effort, but continuing with current grammar-intensive pedagogy that is not conducive to student wishes is also costly. By conducting more case study research throughout Japan, the voices of students will be heard and add to understanding about the factors that prevent WTC. Whether this additional research will also show that students want an earlier start to oral English communication is yet to be discovered, but what can be said is that the more empirical data available the better university administrators will be for making decisions.

Finally, the student interviews and classroom observations were valuable in understanding current Japanese university students’ WTC. However, for real change to take place, more research will be needed that reveals students’ prior experiences regarding WTC and oral English classes. In this study, students articulated their concerns through two interviews where they were free to voice opinions. University policy makers can now use this research to increase their understanding of university students’ prior experiences. Furthermore with more research on Japanese students’ WTC, it is hoped that the speaking ability of students will increase in Japan. Until the educational policy in Japan changes to allow for an early start with English conversation in the first or third grades, all students will not be able to say unequivocally that starting speaking English early has had little effect on current WTC.

**Conclusion**

The current research clearly indicates that the WTC for Japanese university students has been greatly influenced by prior oral English communication experiences. Before starting this study, several studies in the past 5 years related to the Japanese WTC in university were reviewed (Carreira, 2011; Chen & Goh, 2011; Chu & Nakamura, 2010; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Fushino, 2010, 2011; Nakatani, 2010; Sakamoto, 2012; Sugita & Takeuchi, 2010; Yashima, 2009).
Appendix A

Second Language (L2) Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Questionnaire (English)

In the 20 situations below, please indicate if you would or would not communicate in English. Please write a percentage in the blank. An answer of 0% indicates you would absolutely not communicate in English, and an answer of 100% indicates that you would certainly communicate in English.

0% =--------------------------------------------------------------- = 100%

(These situations could have occurred either in Japan or abroad; even if you have never experienced such a situation, answer based on what you imagine you would do.)

(wtc1) _____ % *Talk with a service station attendant (in that situation).
(wtc2) _____ % *Talk with a physician.
(wtc3) _____ % Present a talk to a group of strangers.
(wtc4) _____ % Talk with an acquaintance while standing in line.
(wtc5) _____ % *Talk with a salesperson in a store.
(wtc6) _____ % Talk in a large meeting of friends.
(wtc7) _____ % *Talk with a police officer.
(wtc8) _____ % Talk in a small group of strangers.
(wtc9) _____ % Talk with a friend while standing in line.
(wtc10) _____ % *Talk with a waiter/waitress in a restaurant.
(wtc11) _____ % Talk in a large meeting of acquaintances.
(wtc12) _____ % Talk with a stranger while standing in line.
(wtc13) _____ % *Talk with a secretary.
(wtc14) _____ % Present a talk to a group of friends.
(wtc15) _____ % Talk in a small group of acquaintances.
(wtc16) _____ % *Talk with a garbage collector.
(wtc17) _____ % Talk in a large meeting of strangers.
(wtc18) _____ % *Talk with a spouse (or boyfriend/girlfriend).
(wtc19) _____ % Talk in a small group of friends.
(wtc20) _____ % Present a talk to a group of acquaintances.

Source. Originally from McCroskey (1992).
Note. Filler items are marked with an asterisk.

Appendix B

Second Language (L2) Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Questionnaire (Japanese)

英語でコミュニケーションをするかしないかを選択するような状況を、下に20示します。コミュニケーションをするかしないかは、全くあなたの自由だと仮定してください。それぞれの状況において、どれくらいのパーセンテージでコミュニケーションすると思うか考えてください。（日本の国内もしくは外国でおこりうる状況です）下線の上に、そのパーセンテージを記入してください。その状況で絶対にしないという場合は0、必ずすると思う場合は100となります。すべて英語で話す状況です。

0% =--------------------------------------------------------------- = 100%

英語で話す状況 (こういう状況を経験したことがなくても想像で回答して下さい。)

(wtc1) _____ % ガソリンスタンドの店員と話す
(wtc2) _____ % *医者と話す
(wtc3) _____ % 知らない人たちにスピーチ（プレゼンテーション）をする
(wtc4) _____ % 列になって待っているとき知り合いと会話をする
(wtc5) _____ % *店で店員と話をする
(wtc6) _____ % 友人の大きな集まり（会議）で発言する
(wtc7) _____ % *警察官・婦人警官と話をする
(wtc8) _____ % 知らない人の小グループで会話をする
(wtc9) _____ % 列になって待っているとき友人と会話をする
(wtc10) _____ % *レストランでウェイトレスが語る
(wtc11) _____ % 知り合いの大好きな集まり（会議）で発言する
(wtc12) _____ % 列になって待っているとき知らない人と会話をする
(wtc13) _____ % *秘書と話をする
Appendix C

Observation Protocol and Notes

Date:
Classroom:
Description of environment and demographics:
Make sure each student has signed the informed consent forms.
Greetings and introductions.
Have homeroom teacher tell class why the researcher is in the class.
Brief overview of the research project.

Observation notes:

Observation reflections:

Possible WTC categories
Volunteer an answer/a comment (hand-raising included).
Give an answer to the teacher’s question (Japanese or English).
Ask the teacher a question (Japanese or English).
Guess the meaning of an unknown word (Japanese or English).
Present own opinion in class/respond to an opinion (Japanese or English).
Volunteer to participate in class activities.
Talk to neighbor/another group member in English.

Schedule interviews.
Allow for students to check researcher’s notes for accuracy.
Saying thank you.

Appendix D

First Interview Protocol and Questions

Check to make sure informed consent forms are signed before conducting interview. Start off with warm-up questions such as name, major, and how the students are feeling to help relax them and set up a positive atmosphere.

1. Can you tell me about your prior language learning experience? (e.g., When did you start to learn English and how did you learn it?)
2. How does your high school English classes differ from what is expected in university?
3. When you first attended university classes, what did you expect the oral English courses to be like? Why did you have this expectation?
4. Are your expectations same as the reality?
5. During most classes, how would you evaluate your oral English participation?
6. When instructors direct questions to the whole class, do you volunteer an answer? Why or why not?
7. Do you talk or volunteer comments in most classes? Why?
8. Under what conditions do you ask questions in most classes? If you do not, why?
9. How do you define “participation” in class?
10. What is the biggest challenge you experience while speaking English?
11. What motivates you to orally participate in class discussions?
12. What are some factors that prevent oral communication?
13. What would help you improve your speaking English-language ability?
14. How did the instructor make it apparent that you were being graded on oral English participation?
15. Has your overall English learning experience so far been a good one? Explain.
16. Based on your experiences, what would you do to improve current policy on oral English instruction?

Appendix E

Second Interview Protocol and Questions

Check to make sure informed consent forms are signed before conducting interview. Start off with warm-up questions such as name, major, and how the students are feeling to help relax them and set up a positive atmosphere.

1. How do your prior speaking experiences with oral English affect your current willingness to communicate?
2. When you experience difficulties in classroom discussions, how do you deal with them?
3. How do you feel about being graded for your oral English participation in class?
4. How do you feel when you do not use English in class?
5. How do you feel about mandatory English classes?
6. How important do you feel oral English classes are?
7. In class you had the opportunity to speak English yet did not. Why is that?
8. I noticed in group activities that you were quiet and did not participate much. Why is that?
9. Please explain how you felt with using English in class with other students. Was it an uncomfortable feeling? Why?
10. In the class today, I noticed that you ... why is that?
11. In the class today, I noticed that you ... why is that?
12. In the class today, I noticed that you ... why is that?
13. In the class today, I noticed that you ... why is that?
14. Finally, how do you think an earlier start would have affected your current learning experiences?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

References

Benesse. (2009). Chugakko eigo ni kansuru kihon chosa (Kyoin chosa) [Basic research about English in junior high school (Teacher perspectives)]. Tokyo, Japan: Author.

Carreira, J. M. (2011). Relationship between motivation for learning EFL and intrinsic motivation for learning in general among Japanese elementary school students. *System, 39*, 90-102. doi:10.1016/j.system.2011.01.009

Chen, Z., & Goh, C. (2011). Teaching oral English in higher education: Challenges to EFL teachers. *Teaching in Higher Education, 16*, 333-345. doi:10.1080/13562517.2010.546527

Chu, M., & Nakamura, T. (2010). A study of Chinese and Japanese college students’ L2 learning styles. *Asian Culture and History, 2*(2), 30-44. Retrieved from http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/ach

Dierkes, J. (2010). Teaching in the shadow: Operators of small shadow education institutions in Japan. *Asia Pacific Education Review, 11*, 25-35. doi:10.1007/s12564-009-9059-3

Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (Eds.). (2009). *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Educational Testing Service. (2011). *Test and score data summary for internet-based paper-based Tests*. Retrieved from http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/TOEFL-SUM-2010.-pdf

Falout, J., Elwood, J., & Hood, M. (2009). Demotivation: Affective states and learning outcomes. *System, 37*, 403-417. doi:10.1016/j.system.2009.03.004

Fushino, K. (2010). Causal relationships between communication confidence, beliefs about group work, and willingness to communicate in foreign language group work. *TESOL Quarterly, 44*, 700-744. doi:10.5054/tq.2010.235993
Fushino, K. (2011). Students’ reactions to a group project in a university English-as-a-foreign-language class for cultural understanding. *Intercultural Communication, 22*, 301-316. doi:10.1080/14675986.2011.617423

Goorhuis-Brouwer, S., & De Bot, K. (2010). Impact of early English language teaching on L1 and L2 development in children in Dutch schools. *International Journal of Bilingualism, 14*, 289-302. doi:10.1177/1367006910367846

Guthrie, C., & Anderson, A. (2010). Visitor narratives: Researching and illuminating actual destination experience. *Qualitative Market Research, 13*, 110-129. doi:10.1108/1352275101032575

Harumi, S. (2011). Classroom silence: Voices from Japanese EFL learners. *ETL Journal, 65*, 260-269. doi:10.1093/elt/ccq046

Hashimoto, K. (2011). Compulsory foreign language activities in Japanese primary schools. *Current Issues in Language Planning, 12*, 167-184. doi:10.1080/14646208.2011.585958

Hodis, G. M., Bardhan, N. R., & Hodis, F. A. (2010). Patterns of change in willingness to communicate in public speaking contexts: A latent growth modeling analysis. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 38*, 248-267. doi:10.1080/00909882.2010.490840

Hu, G., & McKay, S. L. (2012). English language education in East Asia: Some recent developments. *Journal of Multilingual & Multicultural Development, 33*, 345-362. doi:10.1080/01434632.2012.661434

Huang, K. (2011). Motivating lessons: A classroom-oriented investigation of the effects of content-based instruction on EFL young learners’ motivated behaviours and classroom verbal interaction. *System, 39*, 186-201. doi:10.1016/j.system.2011.02.002

Kikuchi, K. (2009). Listening to our learners’ voices: What demotivates Japanese high school students? *Language Teaching Research, 13*, 453-471. doi:10.1177/1362168809341520

Kikuchi, K., & Browne, C. (2009). English educational policy for high school students in Japan: Ideals vs. reality. *RELC Journal, 40*, 172-191. doi:10.1177/0033688209105865

Knell, E., & Chi, Y. (2012). The roles of motivation, affective attitudes, and willingness to communicate among Chinese students in early English immersion programs. *International Education, 41*(2), 66-87. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com.proxy1.nu.edu/docview/1022050418?accountid=28180

Larson-Hall, J. (2008). Weighing the benefits of studying a foreign language at a younger starting age in a minimal input situation. *Second Language Research, 24*, 35-63. doi:10.1177/0267658307082981

Léger, D., & Storch, N. (2009). Learners’ perceptions and attitudes: Implications for willingness to communicate in an L2 classroom. *System, 37*, 269-285. doi:10.1016/j.system.2009.01.001

Lockley, T., & Farrell, S. (2011). Is grammar anxiety hindering English speaking in Japanese students? *JALT Journal, 33*, 175-190. Retrieved from http://jalt-publications.org/jj/issues/2011_11_33.2

Lu, Y., & Hsu, C. (2008). Willingness to communicate in intercultural interactions between Chinese and Americans. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, 37*, 75-88. doi:10.1080/17475750802533356

MacIntyre, P. D., Burns, C., & Jessome, A. (2011). Ambivalence about communicating in a second language: A qualitative study of French immersion students’ willingness to communicate. *The Modern Language Journal, 95*, 81-96. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4781.2010.01141.x

MacIntyre, P. D., & Doucette, J. (2010). Willingness to communicate and action control. *System, 38*, 161-171. doi:10.1016/j.system.2009.12.013

MacIntyre, P. D., & Legatto, J. J. (2011). A dynamic system approach to willingness to communicate: Developing an idiodynamic method to capture rapidly changing affect. *Applied Linguistics, 32*, 149-171. doi:10.1093/applin/amq037

Mack, L. (2012). Does every student have a voice? Critical action research on equitable classroom participation practices. *Language Teaching Research, 16*, 417-434. doi:10.1177/1367658312436922

Matsuoka, R., & Rahimi, A. (2010). The positive effect of conference participation on reducing L2 communication apprehension. *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences, 9*, 1845-1854. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.12.412

McCroskey, J. C. (1992). Reliability and validity of the willingness to communicate scale. *Communication Quarterly, 40*(1), 16-25. doi:10.1080/01463379209369817

McCroskey, J. C. (1997). Willingness to communicate, communication apprehension, and self-perceived communication competence. In J. A. Daly, J. C. McCroskey, J. Ayres, T. Hopf, & D. M. Ayres (Eds.), *Avoiding communication: Shyness, reticence, and communication apprehension* (2nd ed., pp. 75-108). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

McKenzie, R. M. (2008). The complex and rapidly changing sociolinguistic position of the English language in Japan: A summary of English language contact and use. *Japan Forum, 20*, 267-286. doi:10.1080/09555800802047525

Mercer, S. (2011). The beliefs of two expert EFL learners. *The Language Learning Journal, 39*, 57-74. doi:10.1080/09571736.2010.521571

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). (2009). *Higher education in Japan*. Retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/english/highered/__icsFiles/afield/file/2011/02/28/1302653_001.pdf

Nakatani, Y. (2010). Identifying strategies that facilitate EFL learners’ oral communication: A classroom study using multiple data collection procedures. *The Modern Language Journal, 94*, 116-136. Available from http://online-library.wiley.com/

Navarro, D., & Thornton, K. (2011). Investigating the relationship between belief and action in self-directed language learning. *System, 39*, 290-301. doi:10.1016/j.system.2011.07.002

Peng, J. E. (2012). Towards an ecological understanding of willingness to communicate in EFL classrooms in China. *System, 40*, 203-213. doi:10.1016/j.system.2012.02.002

Peng, J. E., & Woodrow, L. (2010). Willingness to communicate in English: A model in the Chinese EFL classroom. *Language Learning, 60*, 834-876. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9922.2010.00576.x

Provenzano, C., & Yue, S. (2011). Take it outside!—Speaking homework for English communication classes. *Intercultural Communication Studies, XX*, 220-238. Retrieved from http://www.uri.edu/iaics/content/2011v20n2/17ChristieProvenzanoSorrellYue.pdf

Rivers, D. J. (2010). National identification and intercultural relations in foreign language learning. *Language & Intercultural Communication, 10*, 318-336. doi:10.1080/14708477.2010.502234

Rivers, D. J. (2012). Modelling the perceived value of compulsory English language education in undergraduate non-
language majors of Japanese nationality. *Journal of Multilingual & Multicultural Development*, 33, 251-267. doi:10.1080/01434632.2012.661737

Sakamoto, M. (2012). Moving towards effective English language teaching in Japan: Issues and challenges. *Journal of Multilingual & Multicultural Development*, 33, 409-420. doi: 10.1080/01434632.2012.661437

Shawer, S. (2010). Communicative-based curriculum innovations between theory and practice: Implications for EFL curriculum development and student cognitive and affective change. *The Curriculum Journal*, 21. 333-359. doi:10.1080/09585176.2010.506802

Sugita, M., & Takeuchi, O. (2010). What can teachers do to motivate their students? A classroom research on motivational strategy use in the Japanese EFL context. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 4, 21-35. doi:10.1080/17501220802450470

Thomas, G. (2011). A typology for the case study in social science following a review of definition, discourse, and structure. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 17, 511-521. doi:10.1177/1077800411409884

Torikai, K. (2005). The challenge of language and communication in twenty-first century Japan. *Japanese Studies*, 25, 249-256. doi:10.1080/10371390500342733

Trinder, R. (2013). Business students’ beliefs about language learning in a university context. *English for Specific Purposes*, 32, 1-11. doi:10.1016/j.esp.2012.06.003

Watanabe, Y. (2013). Willingness to communicate and Japanese high school English learners. *JALT Journal*, 35, 153-172. Retrieved from http://jalt-publications.org/jj/issues/2013-11_35.2

Williams, K. E., & Andrade, M. R. (2008). Foreign language learning anxiety in Japanese EFL university classes: Causes, coping, and locus of control. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 5, 181-191. Retrieved from http://e-flt.nus.edu.sg/v5n22008/williams.pdf

Yashima, T. (2002). Willingness to communicate in a second language: The Japanese EFL context. *Modern Language Journal*, 86, 54-66. doi:10.1111/1540-4781.00136

Yashima, T. (2009). International posture and the ideal L2 self in the Japanese EFL context. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 144-163). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Yoshida, K., Mori, H., Suzuki, T., Sakamoto, M., Toyoda, H., Watanabe, Y., & Izumi, S. (2011). *Soki eigo gakushu no chuugakko eigo gakushu eno eikyo* [Effects of early English language learning on junior high school English studies]. Tokyo, Japan: Sophia Linguistic Institute for International Communication/The Japan Institute for Educational Measurement.

Zhao, L. (2012). Investigation into motivation types and influences on motivation: The case of Chinese non-English majors. *English Language Teaching*, 5(3), 100-122. doi:10.5539/elt.v5n3p100

Zhong, Q. (2013). Understanding Chinese learners’ willingness to communicate in a New Zealand ESL classroom: A multiple case study drawing on the theory of planned behavior. *System*, 41, 740-751. doi:10.1016/j.system.2013.08.001

Zhou, H. (2012). Enhancing non-English majors’ EFL motivation through cooperative learning. *Procedia Environmental Sciences*, 12(Pt. B), 1317-1323. doi:10.1016/j.proenv.2012.01.428

**Author Biography**

Grant L. Osterman received his EdD from Northcentral University. He is an adjunct at 3 universities in Japan and is a K-12 administrator.