

# The Effects of Paired Task Repetition on EFL Learners' Attitude toward Speaking English

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

For well-balanced teaching practice in the English as a foreign language (EFL) environment, the coordination of the four macro language skills (i. e., Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing) is important. Moreover, Nation (2013) asserted that this aspect is crucial to provide learners with balanced opportunities to learn the four strands of a language course, namely, meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) conducted a survey of approximately 90,000 third-year high school students in Japan on their English ability (MEXT, 2015) and concluded that students still lack proficiency in output skills because of insufficient exposure to these skills during classroom instruction. Specifically, only 30.7% students responded that there were speaking activities, such as speeches or presentations, in class. However, another

survey among junior and senior high school students by the Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute (2014) that reported similar results revealed that over 90% of the students surveyed considered it “cool” to be able to speak English, and this motivated them to learn to communicate in the language. Furthermore, other studies asking high school and college students about the skills they sought to improve found that speaking was by far the skill they most wished to improve (Iwata, 2011; Iwata & Suzuki, 2017). Therefore, given the need for greater attention to speaking instruction, it is necessary to develop speaking activities appropriate to the Japanese EFL context regardless of the age of learners.

## **1.2 General Problems with Speaking Activities**

In order to ensure the success of a speaking activity in classrooms, Ur (1996) highlighted the following four problems: (1) inhibition, where inevitable real-time exposure to an audience may lead to anxiety over making mistakes, receiving criticism, or extreme shyness, (2) having nothing to say, where the speakers cannot think of anything to say or demonstrate a reluctance to express themselves, (3) low or uneven participation, where some speakers are more dominant in group talk than others, and (4) the use of the mother tongue, where students felt easier using a shared mother tongue. Therefore, the activity in this study considered the following points to overcome these problems. First, the activity adopted the use of pair-work, as this strategy can help reduce anxiety in speaking by helping students relax, unlike in front of a large audience, and encourages them to speak because there are only two interlocutors in pair-work. Second, by designating topics with a written

text, students would know about the topic and its content; therefore, problem (2) above can be avoided. The text would work as a sample of appropriate expressions; hence, they need not revert to their mother tongue.

In order to identify factors other than learners' linguistic abilities that can affect speech performance, Hiromori (2014) adopted an open-response format survey and categorized the protocols into cognitive and affective factors. Although not enough attention had been paid to these factors, he concluded that they were important components to be considered in speech instruction.

### **1.3 Oral Task Repetition for CAF Development**

Generally, second or foreign language learners hope to achieve native-like speaking ability. In order to achieve this goal, Ellis (2009) pointed out three key aspects in language production: complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF). A method that can improve CAF is task repetition (e.g., Ahmadian & Tavakoli, 2010). However, Skehan's Limited Capacity Hypothesis (1998) suggests that there are trade-off effects because of limited mental resources, especially attentional capacity and working memory, so that if the speaker focuses on meaning or fluency, then accuracy and complexity generally reduce. Therefore, speakers who communicate sufficiently do not continue to develop accuracy, but meaning (making sense), the most important aspect in communication, can be achieved (Higgs & Clifford, 1982). Indeed, for Japanese EFL learners, especially in this research, the main aim is to be able to convey meaning reasonably fluently. To this end, instruction should focus on helping them speak more fluently than accurately (Nation, 2013).

Therefore, the activity adopted in this study focused on fluency by using a modified version of 4/3/2 (Nation, 2013), in which students speak on a given topic three times repeatedly for 2 minutes, 1.5 minutes, and 1 minute. This will ensure the most important learning condition for language learning: repetition (Larsen-Freeman, 2009). Furthermore, considering the three stages in Levelt's (1989) speech production model, namely, conceptualization, formulation, and articulation, the first two stages could be challenging. To reduce the students' burden in the conceptualization (topic) and formulation (grammar and expression) stages, topics and texts were provided. In addition, planning time was provided before the initial speech because planning is indispensable to speech, and affects CAF (Ellis, 2005).

In order to investigate more realistic in-class practices in EFL settings, two different types of topic introductions were adopted, which aimed to avoid learners becoming tired and bored of monotonous topics. One type of topic was taken from topics they had written on as Writing IV instructions, and the other was taken from stories they had just read. In short, they might have had to remember what they previously wrote on topics from their Writing IV course, or to retell a story they had quickly read on the spot to a partner who had read a different story. Furthermore, in EFL classrooms, where the learners are not proficient, it is better not to put too much pressure on the speakers. As Yousefi (2016) suggests, a sense of security should be provided for learners with high anxiety, low risk-taking, low confidence, and low motivation. Therefore, they were allowed to choose ten words to look at as hints when speaking.

## **1.4 Purpose of the Study**

This study aimed to investigate the feasibility of a particular classroom speaking activity using a questionnaire and task repetition in the Japanese EFL context.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Participants**

The study participants were 26 female Japanese native speakers in the second year of junior college who were enrolled in the Writing IV course in the second semester of 2016. Their English proficiency ranged from the A2 to B1 levels in the European Framework of Reference for Languages. The data of six students were eliminated because of absences.

### **2.2 Material**

#### **2.2.1 Speaking Topics**

Two types of topics were introduced in the speaking activity. The first type of topic was taken from the Writing IV course, which they had completed before the activity with two revisions, based on the instructor's interventions with regard to grammar and contents. The topics were as follows: (1) A person I admire, (2) Procedure, (3) My emotions, and (4) My most challenging experience. The second type included the following stories adopted from Heyer (1994): (1) The color TV, (2) The man in the blue car, (3) A love story, (4) Looking for love, (5) Sunshine in a box, (6) Two happy men, (7) The kind waitress, and (8) The power of love.

### **2.2.2 Questionnaires**

Two questionnaire surveys were conducted. One, at the beginning of the course, had questions on the following items: (1) the English skills they are most confident in, (2) the English skills they are least confident in, (3) the English skill they want to improve the most, and (4) the average number of English classes they took in their high school.

The other survey, conducted after they completed the speaking activities, investigated students' responses on the following items: (5) the English skills they are most confident in, (6) the English skills they are least confident in, (7) improvement in their oral fluency, (8) improvement in their accuracy, (9) understanding their partner, (10) ability to successfully write a summary of what was heard and the difficulties faced, (11) the time limit of the speaking activity, (12) their preferred topic and why, (13) strengths of this activity, (14) suggestions for improvement on this activity, and (15) their evaluation of the whole process using an open-response format.

### **2.3 Procedure**

During the first week of the course, a preliminary questionnaire survey was conducted to determine the participants' past English learning experiences in high school and their perception of their English skills. The first speaking training was conducted in the fourth week of the course and the training sessions continued for eight weeks, followed by a second questionnaire survey. Speaking topics from Writing IV were adopted in the first, third, fifth, and seventh weeks, where they were allowed to choose no more than ten key words as cues from their works for the talk. Approximately three minutes were allocated to planning the

speech. Story retellings were conducted in the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth weeks, where the student-participants first read a story and then answered comprehension questions with the aid of pictures. They quickly checked their answers with their peers who had read the same story and were allowed to pick no more than ten words as cues for their talk, followed by three minutes for planning. Therefore, they experienced each type of topic four times. The participants were seated in six columns; the students in three alternate columns were designated as first speakers, and the others as second speakers. The groups of first and second speakers were paired and assigned different stories. The first speakers (FS-1 through FS-13) spoke three times successively (see Figure 1). For example, the first speaker (FS-1) spoke for 2 minutes to her partner (SS-13), then moved one seat immediately and spoke for 1.5 minutes to a different listener (SS-12), and finally moved one more seat and spoke for 1 minute to a third listener (SS-11). They then switched roles and the group of second speakers (SS-1 through SS-13) completed

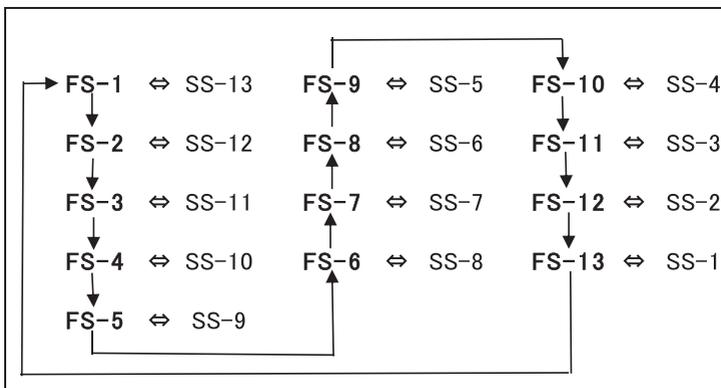


Figure 1. Pair-work procedure.

the activity following the same procedure. After the speaking sessions, they were asked to write a summary of what they had heard from their peers. They exchanged their summaries with their partners and checked the contents to establish that they had understood the talk before the summaries were collected by the instructor.

## **2.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis**

The preliminary questionnaire survey was conducted at the beginning of the course, and the responses to items (1), (2), (3), and (4) were analyzed. The post questionnaire survey was also conducted immediately after the speaking session and the responses to items (5) and (6) were compared to their counterparts on the first questionnaire and analyzed. The responses for items (7), (8), (9), and (10) were analyzed based on whether the responses were positive, neutral, or negative. Items (11) and (12) were analyzed based on the students' choice along with their given reasons, while items (13) and (14) were analyzed by identifying popular responses. The participants' responses to item (15) were chunked into meaningful units and classified under the following categories developed by Hiromori (2014) and modified to fit this study: (1) Anxiety, (2) Positive Appraisal of a Task, (3) Self-Efficacy, and (4) Language Consciousness and Abilities.

## **3. Results**

Table 1 presents the results for the preliminary questionnaire items (1) to (4). On item (1), focusing on productive skills, few participants chose speaking (10%) and writing (0%). On item (2), productive skills (speaking and writing) were popular answers (40% and 20% respectively) as their

least confident skills. On item (3), the skill they wanted to improve the most was speaking. On item (4), 75% of the respondents answered that they had had over four classes a week in high school. Informal input revealed that none of them had regular English speaking practice or free talk at high school; at most, they wrote a script or manuscript before presenting it orally. Table 2 presents the results for the post questionnaire items (5) to (12). On item (5), about the skills they are most confident in, speaking and writing each increased to 20%, while listening decreased to 35%. On item (6), about the skills they are least confident in, speaking decreased to 30% and writing to 10%. However, reading increased to 15%. On item (7), 65% of the participants agreed that they felt that their oral fluency improved, whereas the rest did not. Typical responses were: "The more I repeated, the more I felt I was able to speak smoothly" and "I did not particularly feel that I was able to speak more fluently." On item (8), 40% felt that they improved their language accuracy, 50% did not, and 10% felt that their accuracy decreased. Typical responses were: "I was able to correct my utterances in the next session when I noticed something was wrong, so I felt I was able to speak better," "I did not feel any changes because I had to speak three times immediately in a row, so I did not have time to modify my talk," and "As the time allocation became shorter, I panicked, and I felt my accuracy decrease." On item (9), all the participants answered that they understood what their peers said. Typical responses were: "It was relatively easy to understand" and "I was able to understand with the help of gestures." On item (10), 80% gave positive responses, 15% neutral, and 5% negative. Typical responses were: "It was not easy but I was able to write it anyway," "I had problems with grammar and how to

**Table 1**  
**Preliminary Questionnaire**

(1) Which English skill are you most confident about?	Reading	5 (25%)
	Listening	10 (50%)
	Writing	0 ( 0%)
	Speaking	2 (10%)
	Grammar	1 ( 5%)
	None of the above	2 (10%)
(2) Which English skill are you least confident about?	Reading	0 ( 0%)
	Listening	2 (10%)
	Writing	4 (20%)
	Speaking	8 (40%)
	Grammar	6 (30%)
	None of the above	0 ( 0%)
(3) What English skill do you want to improve most?	Reading	0 ( 0%)
	Listening	2 (10%)
	Writing	1 ( 5%)
	Speaking	16 (80%)
	Grammar	1 ( 5%)
	None of the above	0 ( 0%)
(4) What was the average number of English classes in your	7 classes	3 (15%)
	4 to 6	12 (60%)
	2 to 3	5 (25%)

*N* = 20

summarize, so I was not confident about that,” and “I understood the story but could not summarize it because of my poor vocabulary, expressions, and grammatical knowledge.” Concerning item (11), 50% felt it was too long, 25% felt the time was appropriate, and 25% felt that the time was too short. The reasons cited include: “It was too long because appropriate words and phrases with correct grammar did not come to my mind though I knew what I wanted to say, and I had to cut corners and ended my talk quickly,” “The time I had was just appropriate,” and “I felt the time was too short because I had a lot of things that I wanted to say and I could not think of the appropriate words immediately.” On item

**Table 2**  
**Post Questionnaire Responses**

Items	Skill		
(5) Which English skill are you most confident about?	Reading	4 (20%)	
	Listening	7 (35%)	
	Writing	4 (20%)	
	Speaking	4 (20%)	
	Grammar	1 ( 5%)	
	None of the above	0 ( 0%)	
(6) Which English skill are you least confident about?	Reading	3 (15%)	
	Listening	2 (10%)	
	Writing	2 (10%)	
	Speaking	6 (30%)	
	Grammar	7 (35%)	
	None of the above	0 ( 0%)	
	Positive	Neutral	Negative
(7) Did you feel that your fluency improved?	13 ( 65%)	7 (35%)	0 ( 0%)
(8) Did you feel that your accuracy improved?	8 ( 40%)	10 (50%)	2 (10%)
(9) Did you understand what your partners said?	20 (100%)	0 ( 0%)	0 ( 0%)
(10) Did you write a summary successfully?	16 ( 80%)	3 (15%)	1 ( 5%)
	Too long	Appropriate	Too short
(11) How do you feel about the time limitation?	10 ( 50%)	5 (25%)	5 (25%)
	Writing topics (about myself)	Story	No preference
(12) Which topic did you prefer and why?	2 ( 10%)	14 (70%)	4 (20%)

*N* = 20

(12), 70% preferred Story, 10% chose Writing IV topics, and 20% had no preference. Typical responses for this item were: "I preferred story retelling because it was easy to understand, interesting, and easier than talking about myself," "Writing topics were better because it was easier to talk about myself and I remember what I wrote," and "I did not feel any difference between the two types of topic, but I had fun with both

types.”

The popular responses for item (13) were as follows: “I think I can improve my speaking and listening abilities simultaneously,” “I can realize my current speaking ability,” and “It was good to have more opportunities to make speeches in English and I tried very hard to make myself understood in English.” However, item (14) had few responses, one of which was, “There was almost no time to check and modify my story before the second and third talk.” For item (15), in which the answers were chunked into meaningful units, 55 responses were collected and analyzed. The results of the analysis and typical accounts for each category are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
*Typical Accounts for Each Category*

Category	%	Typical accounts
Anxiety	26%	“I felt at ease when I spoke because my friend listened to me attentively and gave backchannel feedback, such as nodding.” (Positive) “I panicked because I had to finish on time.” (Negative)
Positive Appraisal of a Task	33%	“It was really fun speaking English enthusiastically to my friends.” “I liked this activity because it was practical.”
Self-Efficacy	5%	“I felt very happy when I made myself understood in English.” “I tried to listen to the talk very carefully and was able to understand it.”
Language Consciousness and Ability	36%	“I was frustrated because I could not think of any expressions in English.” “I realized how poor my vocabulary was.”
<i>N</i> = 55 responses	100%	

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The preliminary questionnaire revealed that the participants felt

that their productive skills were weak because of a lack of opportunities to speak in English; this corresponds to the typical traits of Japanese learners of English (MEXT, 2015). After the course, the number of participants who named productive skills as their least confident slightly decreased, and as their most confident slightly increased. Since this course was Writing IV, which included speaking practice, this result might seem reasonable and even predictable to some extent. However, the reasons that Listening decreased as most confident and Reading increased as least confident were not clear. Therefore, considering that the number of participants was limited, the results of these questionnaires could be interpreted as not showing a huge difference.

Although 65% of the student-participants felt their oral fluency had improved, they did not consider the time factor (i.e., gradual lessening of time allocation) as contributing to their improvement. Rather, they merely felt that their improvement was due to repetition of the same activity. This is probably because fluency can improve through task repetition of the same content, though not when the content changes (Gass, Mackey, Alvarez-Torres, & Fernandez-Garcia, 1999). Hence, more time was needed before the participants would feel any improvement in their speaking ability.

The students indicated that improvement in their accuracy was harder to attain, not only because a new language requires time to be produced in the oral activity (Harmer, 2007), but also because time pressures can affect language output, whether through ungrammatical utterances or no utterances at all. Therefore, the students with little to say had time left, and those with much to say felt time constraints. They reported difficulties in articulating their thoughts in English even when

using writing drafts or story texts as samples and referring to key words. Interestingly enough, although the speakers were not always satisfied with their speech, the listeners were confident that they understood their peers. Gestures worked effectively here and should be allowed unless the speakers rely heavily on them. This might suggest that more initial scaffolding or conscious learning of useful structures is needed and that time pressures should be lessened or even eliminated.

In addition, summary writing also proved difficult for the students, and many reported problems with grammar and the appropriate use of expressions. However, 80% responded that they were able to complete the task, despite the limited information from the speaker. In fact, the end products varied in both quality and quantity. Some of the summaries omitted too many important points, whereas others contained too much detail. Identifying the source of this problem is beyond the scope of this study; the important point is that the students tried their best.

For the overall strength of this activity, the students responded that the speaking activity provided them with opportunities to use English and a positive perspective on their future language improvement. However, as a weakness, they identified the lack of time to reflect on their language or check the original text so as to modify their talks before subsequent trials. If they could have done so, their fluency and accuracy could have improved (Date & Takatsuka, 2012). Furthermore, three points should be clarified based on the students' open responses. First, they enjoyed the activity because of its practical English use. Second, the task offered learners opportunities to assess their current English level, including their strengths and weaknesses, which could become an incentive for them to learn more. Finally, feedback in the form of non-

verbal back channel cues facilitated the student-speakers in engaging positively in the activity.

Virtually any topic can be used if sufficient scaffolding is offered consistent with learners' cognitive and language levels. For this particular context, story retelling was preferred probably for the following two reasons: (1) Story retelling did not require the students to generate their own content; and (2) the listeners enjoyed the stories because they differed from their own. Moreover, topics that required the students to talk about themselves could have been too predictable because, being classmates, they might know each other well.

Due to the limited number of participants and protocols, the conclusions of the current study must be tentative. However, it presents important pedagogical implications for the EFL classroom, where insufficient speaking instruction has been prevalent. Although it can be difficult for learners to feel an improvement in their speaking ability within a short time, this type of paired oral task repetition can be used to increase learners' positive expectations of their abilities and reduce their anxiety, which in turn can encourage risk-taking, help in overcoming their fear of communicating in a foreign language (Pyun, Kim, Cho, & Lee, 2014), and facilitate their willingness to communicate (Hodgson, 2014). The teachers' responsibility is to engage their students actively in learning activities that would help achieve the intended result (Schuell, 1986). Therefore, teachers should create a favorable classroom environment with a careful consideration of the context.

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