

# Fostering Students' Willingness to Communicate in English Through Skit Activities

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## Abstract

This study reports on a series of skit activities in a high school English class. The class aims to foster students' positive attitudes toward speaking in English with a focus on the concept of willingness to communicate (WTC), anxiety, and the self-perceived competence that supports it. In this practice, 54 high school students performed a series of skit activities. In the instruction, a teacher prepared skits with familiar content but the degree of freedom was increased as the course progressed. Students were allowed to work cooperatively in a pair or group during the activities. Pre- and post-questionnaires revealed a slight increase in perceived competence and unchanged anxiety, and contrary to expectations, a slight decrease in WTC. On the other hand, the results of a speaking test indicated that speaking fluency and overall performance had significantly improved. In addition, the results of the reflection sheets and supplementary interviews conducted in each class showed that the students were enjoying the skit activities, cooperating with classmates, and gradually enjoying engaging in the task, although this did not necessarily lead to their willingness to use English inside and outside the class.

**Keywords:** fluency, skit activities, willingness to communicate, speaking anxiety, perceived competence

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the new Course of Study (MEXT, 2018), great attention is being paid to the area of speaking (interaction). Speaking skills and a positive attitude toward speaking in English are acquired only through actual speaking activities, but some students, especially those who think they are not good at English, feel anxious about speaking English in class. In this study, the positive attitude toward speaking in English was

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defined within the framework of willingness to communicate (WTC), and instruction incorporating skit activities was disseminated to reduce students' anxiety regarding using English and develop positive perceptions of their own ability. The effectiveness of the activities was verified through a questionnaire, performance test, and students' retrospective reflection.

## **2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

### **2.1 Constructs of Willingness to Communicate**

#### **(1) Willingness to communicate**

WTC was defined as an "individual's personality based on predisposition toward approaching or avoiding the initiation of communication when free to do so" (McCroskey, 1992, p. 17). It was originally a concept in L1 situations, but it was later applied to L2 situations. WTC in L2 was defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998), emphasizing that the concept is not a trait personality, but rather a situation-based attitude toward using the language. The concept has been attracting researchers' attention (e.g., MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre et al., 2002; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; McCroskey, 1997; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987; Yashima, 1998, 2002), as WTC is the key element in fostering students' positive attitude toward using L2. MacIntyre (1994) conducted a questionnaire survey to clarify the correlations between the valuables of WTC and indicated a causal model, which showed that communication anxiety and self-perceived competence were the key determiners among individual variables.

#### **(2) Communication anxiety and perceived competence**

Horwitz et al. (1986) defined L2 anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128) and suggested that the concept was composed of "communication apprehension," "fear of negative evaluation," and "test anxiety." Although subsequent studies (e.g., Motoda, 2005) have not necessarily validated the three-component structure, learners with high anxiety have been reported to have a lower quality of speaking performance in free conversation (e.g., Aida, 1994).

In the classroom situation, students were anxious when they lacked the confidence to speak in English. In that sense, L2 anxiety is affected by one's self-evaluation of their skills. Self-perceived competence is defined as "the feeling that one has the capacity to communicate effectively at a particular moment" (MacIntyre et al., 1998). In other words, if students have high anxiety and self-assess themselves as incapable of communicating in English, they tend to avoid the spontaneous and active use of English (Isoda, 2009; Yashima, 2002). Some have suggested that providing opportunities for learners to experience a sense of accomplishment and regular success while learning a foreign language is important to reduce learner anxiety (Matsuda & Goble, 2004).

## 2.2 Fostering Students' Willingness to Communicate in English Classrooms

Many attempts in English classrooms have been conducted to foster students' WTC, reduce their anxiety, and develop their confidence regarding speaking English.

Isoda (2007, 2008, 2009) conducted a series of empirical studies on Japanese university students. Incorporating the SPM (speaking per minute) activity, an impromptu one-minute pair speech activity, he reported that students' perceived competence, anxiety, and avoidance of speaking English were all improved in three weeks. Fukuda (2014) employed a production task in class and succeeded in fostering a positive attitude toward self-competence, although anxiety and avoidance of communication did not change significantly. Ishihara (2020) focused on reducing anxiety in speaking and conducted a series of pair and group presentation tasks, which led to successfully reducing their anxiety and developing WTC. Iimura (2016) reported that her group presentation activity also succeeded in fostering students' confidence and motivation in using English, although speaking English in front of the class is expected to be an anxiety-provoking activity. However, the teachers' attempts were not always rewarded, as in Watanabe's (2013) longitudinal research at high school in which she found no significant change in WTC.

Most research suggested that controlling anxiety through classroom management, setting up a cooperative learning environment in class, and providing a chance to try and experience success while implementing the speaking activity are the key issues when planning and organizing English classes. For example, Makino's reports (2013, 2016a, 2016b) concluded that the teacher's effort to build rapport with students and encourage learning in groups led to an increase in students' self-efficacy.

## 3. METHOD

### 3.1 Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of a series of skit activities in an English class from the perspective of fostering students' WTC. The following questions are examined:

RQ1: Do the participants develop WTC through skit activities designed to reduce anxiety and foster confidence regarding speaking in English?

RQ2: Do the participants develop speaking abilities through skit activities?

RQ3: How do the participants change their feelings through skit activities?

### 3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were 54 students in the first, second, and third grade in a high school. They belonged to either the agriculture or welfare course. They can be classified as Pre-A1 to A1 level of the Japanese version of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR-J), according to the teacher's

observations in everyday classes. Note that as the participants who had been absent from either the pre-, mid-, or post tests were excluded from the analysis, the data of 37 students were examined.

### 3.3 Classroom Instruction

The classroom instruction was carried out from April to July in 2021. Throughout the period, students performed four skit activities in 15 lessons. Each skit activity was treated in three or four lessons. The topics of the skits included the school life of their course, which was thought to evoke students' interests. The time allotted to the skit activities during each class were about 15 minutes and the rest of the class was conducted according to the material from the textbook.

From the first skit activity to the last, participants were required to perform a role via improvisation. That is, the participants were given a complete script and asked to recite the lines during the initial skit activities. This enabled students to gain experience in speaking and receiving words from a partner and respond to the partner's reactions through dialogs prepared in advance. Later activities included more freedom to arrange or add lines through improvisation.

The first and second skit activities involved the following sessions: (1) students were given a skit scenario prepared by the teacher and they practiced reading it to the whole class several times, (2) students made pairs, practiced, and performed the skit with the other pair as audience, and (3) exchanged feedback with each other. While doing so, the feedback expressions were taught so that students could make comments in English. Also, at the end of the session, they were given a worksheet to review their performance.

For the third skit activity, the participants were given a title and the beginning of a dialog during the first lesson and were then asked to complete the dialog freely in pairs. In the second lesson, they practiced their skit in pairs, while a teacher gave each pair some comments. In the third lesson, each pair had a chance to perform their skit to other students and to give and receive comments to each other.

For the last skit, students were given a title of the skit and made a dialog in pairs in the first lesson. They were encouraged to include phrases and expressions learned in the previous skit activities while the teacher supported them in writing the script whenever necessary. They practiced the skit in pairs during the second lesson and provided a presentation in front of the whole class during the third lesson. Also, at the end of the dialog, the teacher asked an impromptu question to the performing pair, and they answered it in English.

The course was designed so that students could engage in skit activities with confidence and motivation. For example, the course ensured that the students had enough time to practice and prepare before the presentation in class. Also, most of the tasks required cooperation within the pair group, which can reduce the risk of making mistakes in front of the class. Instead, students had to exchange encouraging and positive comments to each other during the session. In addition, the script used in the skit activities started from being

simple and restricted, to being freer and more impromptu. These were all thought to contribute to decreasing students' language anxiety and fostering self-perceived competence.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

#### **(1) Performance test**

To examine students' speaking ability, role-play speaking tests were conducted before and after the instruction. An examiner played the role of a foreign student, who was experiencing trouble during an everyday situation, and asked students for help. The situation in the pre-test was at a bus stop and focused on uncertainty regarding which bus to take and where to wait. The post-test was situated at a bento shop in a school and an examiner asked a student for a recommendation. The test took about three to five minutes for one student.

All the performances were voice-recorded and analyzed afterwards. Total words used and turns at each test were counted to indicate their fluency and the overall performance was evaluated from three criteria, each allotted a mark out of 10 points: Content (task achievement and understanding), attitude (fluency and strategy use in interaction), and language (accuracy and complexity).

#### **(2) Questionnaire**

A questionnaire was conducted three times in the course; before, in the middle, and after the instruction. The questionnaire consisted of items on anxiety, self-perceived competence, and WTC, which were composed of four items each. The items were based on the previous studies (Ishihara, 2020; Isoda, 2009; Kumada & Okamura, 2017; Yashima, 2009) and were partially changed to suit the students and activities in this study. All the questionnaire items were arranged on an A4 sheet and answered according to a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 6: *I strongly agree* to 1: *I strongly disagree*.

#### **(3) Reflection sheet and interview**

The participants were asked to write comments on a reflection sheet after each presentation, after finishing all the skit activities, and after the post-performance test. Students' reflective comments at each time were hand-written on an A4 sheet so that they could review any time what they wrote. They were asked to write what they had tried to do and how they felt during the session in Japanese. All the comments were typed by the authors and analyzed afterwards.

To supplement the comments on the reflection sheet, seven students were asked to participate in an interview. The interview session was conducted after the course finished, with one student at a time, along with a teacher. In the interview, students were asked about their feelings during the activities, changes in their

feelings, and their turning points. Each interview took about 10 to 15 minutes. The interview session was voice-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Changes of WTC, Anxiety, and Perceived Competence Through Skit Activities

To describe the changes in students' WTC, anxiety, and self-perceived competence through the series of skit activities, a questionnaire was implemented before, in the middle, and after the course. Descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Changes of Students' WTC, Anxiety, and Self-perceived Competence**

	Pre		Mid		Post	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Willingness to Communicate (<math>\alpha = .88</math>)</b>	<b>3.16</b>	<b>1.10</b>	<b>2.82</b>	<b>1.16</b>	<b>2.75</b>	<b>1.11</b>
3. I am willing to speak in English when waiting in line with a friend.	3.14	1.42	2.92	1.28	2.84	1.20
6. I am willing to speak in English in a group discussion in an English class.	3.49	1.11	3.00	1.27	2.92	1.07
9. I am willing to speak in English at a group work with members I meet for the first time.	2.95	1.29	2.59	1.46	2.49	1.15
12. I am willing to speak in English in a group of my friends.	3.08	1.24	2.78	1.28	2.76	1.28
<b>Anxiety (<math>\alpha = .68</math>)</b>	<b>4.69</b>	<b>0.88</b>	<b>4.66</b>	<b>0.93</b>	<b>4.36</b>	<b>1.29</b>
1. I get nervous when asked questions in English without preparation.	4.92	1.26	4.86	1.23	4.49	1.52
4. I get ashamed when I answer in English in class.	4.43	1.50	4.19	1.52	4.05	1.37
7. I feel my heart pounding when I'm spoken to in English.	4.76	1.28	4.92	1.15	4.54	1.55
10. I get confused when I speak English in class.	4.57	1.37	4.68	1.32	4.38	1.57
<b>Self-Perceived Competence (<math>\alpha = .83</math>)</b>	<b>2.07</b>	<b>0.81</b>	<b>2.39</b>	<b>0.84</b>	<b>2.39</b>	<b>0.88</b>
2. I can do good on the speaking tasks assigned in class.	2.51	1.13	2.86	1.23	2.76	1.12
5. I can get good scores in English speaking tests.	1.95	1.04	2.51	1.06	2.49	1.11
8. I am good at speaking English.	1.89	0.98	2.14	1.04	2.19	1.04
11 I know how to improve English speaking skills.	1.92	0.97	2.03	1.08	2.14	1.04

As the internal consistency on each factor was verified, WTC:  $\alpha = .88$ ; anxiety:  $\alpha = .68$ ; and perceived competence:  $\alpha = .83$ , two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the difference in each factor along the timeline. The result shows that the interaction and the main effect of factors were significant,  $F(3.10, 111.74) = 5.11, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .12$ ;  $F(1.54, 55.52) = 68.76, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta_p^2 = .66$ , respectively, although the main effect of time was not significant,  $F(2, 72) = 1.17, p = .32, \eta_p^2 = .03$ .

The test of simple main effect showed that the changes in anxiety were not significant ( $F(1.67, 60.38) = 2.94, p = .07, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .08$ ), but the changes in WTC and perceived competence were both significant ( $F(2, 72) = 3.34, p = .04, \eta_p^2 = .09$ ;  $F(2, 72) = 4.00, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .10$ , respectively). The result of multiple comparisons showed that perceived competence significantly increased between the pre-test and the mid-test, and WTC decreased between the pre-test and the post-test.

#### 4.2 Development of Students' Speaking Ability

Table 2 shows the results of the role-play speaking tests conducted before and after the course. Indicators of fluency of the students' performance (total words uttered during the test and turns taken in the test) have increased significantly:  $t(36) = -2.35, p = .02, r = .36$ ;  $t(36) = -6.68, p < .001, r = .76$ , respectively. Moreover, overall speaking ability, which was evaluated from the three criteria, content, attitudes, and language, was shown to have improved significantly,  $t(36) = -2.17, p = .04, r = .34$ .

**Table 2. Score Changes of the Pre- and Post-speaking Tests**

		Pre-test		Post-test		$t(36)$	95%CI	$p$	$r$
		$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$				
Words		17.35	13.01	22.11	12.95	-2.35	[-8.85, -0.66]	.02	.36
Turns		3.22	2.35	6.97	3.27	-6.68	[-4.90, -2.62]	< .001	.76
Speaking	Total	16.41	4.86	18.16	4.52	-2.17	[-3.40, -0.12]	.04	.34
	Content	5.32	1.89	6.30	2.05	-2.77	[-1.69, -0.26]	.01	.42
	Attitude	5.57	2.02	5.81	1.56	-0.87	[-0.81, 0.33]	.39	.15
	Language	5.51	1.61	6.05	1.61	-1.62	[-1.22, 0.44]	.12	.26

#### 4.3 Types of Students' Development

To grasp the changes of the students' attitudes in detail, cluster analysis using Ward's method with Euclidean distance was conducted to categorize the participants into groups. According to the scores of WTC, anxiety, and perceived competence at the time of the pre-test, the students were divided into three clusters. The descriptive statistics of each cluster are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Changes of Students' Attitudes in Each Cluster**

	<i>n</i>	WTC						Anxiety						Perceived Competence					
		pre		mid		post		pre		mid		post		pre		mid		post	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Cl_1	19	2.33	0.63	2.30	0.93	2.18	0.76	4.82	0.78	4.64	0.82	4.29	1.28	1.75	0.59	2.13	0.79	2.21	0.86
Cl_2	10	3.95	0.51	3.05	0.92	3.18	0.99	5.10	0.66	5.33	0.51	5.28	0.48	1.95	0.84	3.06	0.76	2.45	0.89
Cl_3	8	4.16	0.98	3.78	1.33	3.56	1.29	3.78	0.78	3.88	1.03	3.41	1.31	2.97	0.62	2.33	0.78	2.75	0.93

Nineteen students are categorized into Cluster 1. They had the lowest WTC and perceived competence of three clusters at the time of the pre-test, and the anxiety scores were also relatively high. Also, their scores in the speaking tests were the lowest of the three, meaning that they were rather weak in English. While their WTC did not change much, their anxiety seemed to reduce when the self-perceived competence improved.

Cluster 2 includes 10 students. Their perceived competence was low in the beginning; however, the score later improved, although their anxiety remained high. Their WTC was high in the beginning, but it decreased as the course proceeded. Among the three clusters, they had moderate levels of English ability, and although their confidence was improved through the course, they were still anxious about using English.

Cluster 3 includes eight students, whose average scores on the speaking test were the highest among the three clusters. They had the highest scores on perceived competence and WTC, and the lowest scores on anxiety in the pre-test. Although their WTC decreased a little, the other two factors did not seem to change significantly.

Similarly, their average scores on the speaking tests improved: Cluster 1: 15.84 to 17.26, Cluster 2: 16.50 to 18.60, Cluster 3: 17.63 to 19.75, as well as the total words uttered in the test: Cluster 1: 15.47 to 18.42, Cluster 2: 18.00 to 22.40, Cluster 3: 21.00 to 30.50.

#### 4.4 Analysis of Reflection Sheets and Interviews

To examine how and why students change their feelings through skit activities, the reflection sheet was analyzed with KH coder (Higuchi, 2004). The total number of extracted words was 2,512 and the number of overlapping words was 421. After the authors checked the frequency of the words (Table 4), as well as the questions of how and with what words these high frequency words appeared, we decided to summarize some concepts.

Seven students joined the follow-up interviews after the series of activities, answering questions such as: Was your motivation in English class or skit activities changed during the course? If so, when and how was your attitude toward English class or skit activities changed? How was the overall feeling regarding the course?



**Table 4. Top 20 Frequent Words Appearing in the Reflection Sheets**

words	frequency	words	frequency	words	frequency
think 思う	95	vocabulary 単語	36	myself 自分	28
pronunciation 発音	71	a little 少し	35	nervous 緊張	25
presentation 発表	47	reading 読む	34	smoothly スラスラ	24
English 英語	41	skit スキット	33	next 次	24
be able to read 読める	41	voice 声	30	before 前	20
understand 分かる	38	good 良い	30	fun 楽しい	19
difficult 難しい	37	saying 言える	29		

Students A and B, who are categorized in Cluster 1, noted that their past experiences of learning English at junior high school made them anxious and nervous about speaking English in class. Students in Cluster 1 had the lowest perceived competence and WTC among the three clusters at the time of the pre-test. Through the skit activities, however, they were pushed to speak in pairs and in front of the class, as each student had a role in the skit or was responsible for their own lines. This sense of duty and responsibility was thought to be a major motivator of WTC. In fact, students recognized their improvement themselves as they participated in group activities. That led to the decrease of anxiety and increase in confidence, but not as much as the improvement of WTC.

#### **Excerpts of student A and B (students in Cluster 1)**

A: When we made sentences about \*\*\* high school [in the first skit activity], I always left it to others.

However, this time [the fourth skit activity] I was able to create sentences and I felt I've grown up.

B: I didn't speak up in the class [at junior high school] because I'm shy. But the class size in high school was very small and it wasn't like this at all during my junior high school days. Other classmates raised their hands and spoke in the class. I had to be active in this class because we had a small number of members, otherwise no one would raise their hands. I don't want the class to be silent.

Students C, D, and E, categorized in Cluster 2 as having relatively high WTC with high anxiety and low perceived competence, noted that the class atmosphere helped them to use English, although their anxiety remained relatively high at the time of the post-test. For example, student C found that the classroom atmosphere encouraged them to speak up in class. Also, student E enjoyed performing their original script. These experiences led to their willingness to perform the next time. In fact, she improved the scores in their post-performance, in terms of both the fluency (total turns and words) and the overall evaluation of the speaking test.

**Excerpts of student C, D, and E (students in Cluster 2)**

C: I liked speaking earlier as well, but I think my speaking ability was insufficient. It was annoying that I couldn't speak well. But now, if I didn't know the words that I heard or I couldn't find the words that I wanted to say, I can ask others for help regarding them. I want to remember new words and connect them.

D: I left the work [reading and remembering the skit, etc.] to the other group members at first, because I was not very interested in learning English. But gradually, I learned to participate in the activity. Even if I make mistakes or fail at something, my classmates don't laugh at me, but warmly applaud after my presentation. I am not as nervous now.

E: I gradually understood how the activities were to be performed and the skit went more smoothly. Particularly, in skit 4, I played the role of a vegetable-seller and sold vegetables we grew and processed food we made in agriculture classes. We wore aprons for the performance and I felt like we were not playing a role in a skit but speaking English in a real-life situation.

Student F and G in Cluster 3 suggested in the interview that they enjoyed the activities, as they got used to it. However, their attitudes did not change much.

**Excerpts of student F and G (students in Cluster 3)**

F: At first, I read the manuscript in a serious manner and was sometimes at a loss for words. Hence, I didn't think it was interesting. But I came to know more [of the expressions] and I tried to perform like an American. Telling jokes in the skit was unexpectedly fun.

G: On the day of my presentation [the third skit], I prepared and remembered the manuscript diligently, and it was a big success for me. I wasn't nervous, even when the number of audience members increased. [...] In the beginning [at the pre-test], I didn't grasp the words and understand the situation. Contrary to it, I understood the situation much better in the post-test. She [=the teacher, playing the foreign student's role] never agreed to what I recommended, but kept saying she didn't like this or she didn't like that. If she were a friend of mine, I would say, 'don't complain!'

**5. DISCUSSION**

As for the results of RQ 1, the change in the overall class mean shows that there was a significant increase in self-perceived competence, but the effect size was small. Anxiety showed no significant change; conversely, WTC decreased significantly, but the effect size was also small. Thus, looking at the overall picture, we concluded that our skit activities did not sufficiently improve the students' WTC. The results of the cluster analysis showed that a group of learners with low WTC showed a slight reduction in anxiety and a

slight increase in perceived competence, but the change did not seem to lead to sufficient development of WTC.

Through the analysis of the reflection sheets and interviews, it was confirmed that the students became more active in the skit activities in class and worked collaboratively in pairs, groups, and in class. This may have contributed, in part, to a reduction in anxiety and an increase in confidence. However, because the concept of WTC is not so much about a positive attitude toward the task in class, but rather a broad attitude toward the use of English inside and outside the classroom, we were not able to observe sufficient effects in this practice. Also, our skit activities did not necessarily coincide with an actual communicative situation, where the degree of freedom varies. In any case, it is necessary to gradually nurture WTC as the students continue to engage in activities related to speaking in class.

On the other hand, speaking test scores showed significant increases between pre- and post-tests in both fluency (total number of words and turns) and overall test scores (in terms of content, attitude, and language use). This means that the students acquired expressions and strategies of interaction through the skit activities, and their skills were demonstrated in the one-on-one interactive speaking test with the teacher. However, the modest increase in the total number of words compared to the increase in the number of turns, suggests that the students are most likely conducting conversation through short utterances of words and phrases. Considering the changes in WTC, the students did not seem to have reached the level of expressing ideas freely and adequately. This is supported by the fact that the students' reflection sheets include comments on memorizing skits and saying them correctly ("pronunciation," "vocabulary," "reading," and "saying"), rather than communicating in English.

Overall, these results indicate that the students were able to actively engage in the skit activities, gradually gaining confidence and relieving their anxiety. However, these results were only for the skit activities that were engaged in in class, and further work will be needed to shift these attitudes toward the overall use of English in class, as well as outside the classroom.

## NOTES

This article was partially based on the second author's master thesis submitted to the Graduate School of Education, Kagoshima University in January, 2022. The practice, data collection, and analysis were conducted mainly by the second author under the supervision of the first author.

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