

## An investigation into learner attitudes towards communicating in English outside the classroom: a Japanese university student context

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### Abstract

With English classroom time being limited for Japanese university students, and with there being a lack of opportunities to speak English outside the classroom for these students, it is important to provide them with such opportunities. In response to this need, the English House at Chiba University has developed a conversation partner programme involving interaction with university students from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds on a one-to-one basis. However, providing such a program does not necessarily mean that students will make use of it due to their language anxiety, perceived negative self-belief and lack of experience learning autonomously outside the control or direction of teachers. This study focuses on an out-of-class learning program conducted in tandem with intermediate English classes, and investigates students' perceptions of and willingness to participate in such a program. From a qualitative content analysis of participants' responses to written questionnaires and interviews on their experiences of one-to-one conversation sessions, this study highlights how a range of factors such as acclimatization to the situation, sympathetic interlocutors, a perceived increase in communicative competence and choice of topic, has an influence on the reduction of students' anxiety about using English, thereby increasing their willingness to take part in further out-of-class learning opportunities.

## 1. Introduction

Most people would accept that the goal of language learning is to be able to communicate in that language, and to receive the communications of others. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MEXT), in 2013 brought out a course of study that may enable students to improve their levels of communication, particularly oral communication (Fredrick, 2011). This new course includes the concept of conducting English classes in high school in English; “in order to expand opportunities for students to come into contact with English, and make classes into sites of real communication, classes are to be conducted in English, in principle” (Fredrick, 2011). However, such policies face constraints such as teachers’ unwillingness or inability to put the policies into practice and the dominance of reading and translation in university entrance examinations of English. There is also a widespread focus on testing in schools and universities to assess student abilities; very few of these tests focus on productive skills, possibly because these are time-consuming to administer, and are notoriously difficult to grade objectively and quickly. Whatever the reason for the problem, the fact remains that when they start university, the majority of Japanese students are not used to speaking in English and many need to develop the skills to do so. One of the responsibilities of university English teachers is to help students to acquire these skills.

However, students’ English classroom time is limited. The number of English credits necessary to graduate from many public universities in Japan ranges between four and eight. This means that even if the students have the opportunity to use English communicatively in class, by no means a certainty, the number of hours spent using English in class during their university years is limited to between 96 and 192 assuming a sixteen-week term and one credit per course. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of English speaking environments outside the classroom. In a survey conducted at the start of this research, sixteen out of twenty-two students who were attending elective English classes stated that they never or hardly ever spoke English outside the classroom. To counter the problem of a lack of opportunities to use English, universities have developed study abroad programmes or self-access centres in order to increase the environments in which students can use English outside of the classroom. Providing the opportunity, however, will not ensure that students will make use of it. Students also need the motivation to overcome their anxiety about speaking English. Having been through six years of English education focused on form, the correct answer, and avoidance of error, students may be naturally reluctant to expose themselves to a possibly critical or competitive audience by communicating in English in front of others.

In 2013, Chiba University was selected as a Super Global university as part of the Japanese government's Super Global initiative. The university created the *skipwise* program, which focuses on global internships, volunteering, study, and fieldwork. Also related to the university's Super Global status was the establishment of a self-access centre for learners of English called English House. This was created in part to attempt to encourage students to make use of the English that they have learnt at school. At this centre, resources available for students include student assistants (SA) from a variety of countries who act as conversation partners with whom students are able to reserve individual conversation sessions called one-to-ones.

The main objective of the SA one-to-one sessions is to create a non-threatening environment in which students are given an opportunity to communicate in English with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This program also aims to provide a non-textbook learning experience, which is characterized by non-prescribed language content. Students are encouraged to choose the topics they want to talk about, but if assistance is required, vocabulary and discussion worksheets are available. The sessions place emphasis on free, rather than controlled production, and they attempt to motivate students to actively use their passive knowledge. Furthermore, they create an environment in which aspects of language such as language repair and turn taking occur naturally, and not as in the prescribed way that is often seen in textbooks.

English House is used by hundreds of students for study or social purposes; however, in a survey of 6163 university students by *skipwise* (see Table 1), of 2838 students who stated they had never been to English House, 10.3% stated that it was difficult to go there because you have to use English, and a remarkable 48.9% said that it was "difficult to go to English House alone", implying that students do not have the confidence to enter the facility and take advantage of the resources available.

Given the results of this survey, it is clear that more investigation is needed as to how to encourage students to overcome their inhibitions and make use of informal opportunities for learning. The current study investigates whether participating in an out-of-class (OOC) learning component of a language course had an effect on students' attitudes towards using English to communicate outside of the classroom.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Out-of-Class (OOC) learning

It is widely recognized that language learning takes place not only in the classroom but also in between classes when the learner is engaged in learning activities that may

**Table 1 Students who have never used the English House**

I don't know about English House.	305	10.7%
I don't know where English House is.	101	3.6%
It is not clear what I can do at English House.	797	28.1%
I don't feel comfortable using English House by myself.	1389	48.9%
It is difficult to get to the campus.	115	4.1%
I don't think English House is useful for improving my English skills.	19	0.7%
It is difficult to use English House as I have to use English there.	292	10.3%
There are no activities that I would like to join at a good time.	64	2.3%
I have no time to join. I am too busy.	479	16.9%
I am not interested in the English House.	711	25.1%
I can't learn other languages at the English House.	8	0.3%
I don't have much information as I am still new to the university.	368	13.0%
Others	21	0.7%
I have never used English House.	2838	100%

(*skipwise* Program Survey. 2016/ 7 /22)

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be to a greater or lesser extent autonomous. OOC activities, such as the use of self-access centres for the development of communicative skills, or the use of Internet television to gain greater exposure to extended periods of listening, “offer a wider range of affordances for language use and second language acquisition than are generally available in the classroom” (Richards, 2014, p. 15). Such affordances, or opportunities for learning, include developing aspects of communicative and pragmatic competence and “learning through interaction and the negotiation of meaning” (p. 15). As well as providing affordances, OOC activities can benefit learners by contributing to positive learning outcomes and an increase in learner confidence and enjoyment (Lai, 2015). Lai’s study found that OOC learning fulfilled a variety of functions including bringing students closer to the target language and culture, increasing the learners’ positive second language (L2) identity, increasing their motivation to learn and increasing their sense of community. Further, Lai asserts that OOC learning can compensate for the limitations experienced in in-class (IC) learning, such as a heavy focus on form (2015, p. 276).

## 2.2 Autonomous learning

Part of the scope of this study relates to whether students became more willing to seek out opportunities to use English in a non-formal setting after having been strongly encouraged to do so as part of their English course. This in turn relates to the development of student autonomy. Benson (2011) defines autonomy as “a capacity that learners possess and display ... primarily an attribute, although its development and display will be affected by factors in learning situations” (p.123). He describes autonomous learning as “learning in which learners demonstrate a capacity to control their learning” (p.124). This control can take the form of decisions on curriculum, learning skills and resources (Benson, 2001) as well as self-regulation aspects such as control over one’s learning environment, competency beliefs and emotions such as anxiety (Kormos & Csizer, 2014).

Autonomous learning is a key factor in exploiting OOC affordances if the opportunities for students exist. Because of the limited opportunities for students to be exposed to or use English in Japan, students need to make all the use they can of opportunities they find outside of the classroom. As Kormos and Csizer (2014) say, it is virtually impossible to gain a high level of language competence in such an environment unless students have a degree of autonomy (p. 276). Despite this, many students lack the initiative to learn independently of their teacher (Ikeda, 2014). Students who have not had to take control or make their own decisions about learning in their high school years will not suddenly be able to do so merely by matriculating. Related to this problem is the argument concerning whether teachers should expect or encourage a “Western” style of autonomy. Common definitions of autonomous learning involve taking control and responsibility for roles that the teacher usually plays in Japanese schools and universities, which is likely to be difficult for students. Littlewood (1999) suggests a separation into proactive and reactive autonomy. Proactive autonomy, which is the style envisaged in the West, involves students taking control of their own direction, objectives and personal agenda, and of the methods and evaluation used to achieve the objectives. Reactive autonomy, which could be a stepping stone towards proactive autonomy or a goal in its own right, enables the students to decide the actions taken by themselves, such as organizing resources or deciding to look at past exam papers, in response to a direction decided by another (Littlewood, 1999, p. 75). It is this latter style of autonomy that Littlewood predicts Japanese students would initially be more comfortable with.

### 2.3 Motivation and anxiety

Motivation is important for achievement in language learning (Gardner, 1985; Krashen, 1982; Kormos & Csizer, 2014). Motivation explains why people do something, how much effort they will expend and how long they will persist in the activity (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011). However, there is a wide range of opinions on just what constitutes motivation and to what extent each component interacts with the others. According to Krashen (1982), affective variables such as self-confidence and anxiety affect motivation, which in turn lowers the affective filter—a kind of barrier that inhibits successful language acquisition. Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model identifies two basic components or goal-related attitudes: instrumental motivation relating to the value of using the language, and integrative motivation connected to a desire to integrate into a culture. Yashima's (2002) take on integrative motivation differs slightly in that the target community is not clearly defined but is rather a vague concept involving a "favourable attitude towards what English symbolizes", and its role in connecting a person to the world outside Japan. She calls this attitude "international posture", and includes "interest in foreign affairs" and "readiness to interact with intercultural partners" in its description (Yashima, 2002 p. 57). According to Kormos and Csizer (2014), another key component of motivation is "personal agency beliefs" which refers to a person's beliefs about whether he is capable of achieving something or completing a task. For Bandura (1997), a person's self-efficacy beliefs are a greater influence than ability, knowledge or previous positive experience on a person's motivation (as cited in Kormos & Csizer, 2014).

On the other hand, anxiety can have a negative influence on learners' motivation and language learning, particularly language anxiety defined as "an emotional experience uniquely provoked by L2 situations" (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986). MacIntyre's (1994) model of willingness to communicate (WTC) showed that perceived L2 communicative competence and anxiety about communicating in a second language predicted a person's WTC in the L2 and thence their frequency of communication. A later WTC model (MacIntyre, 2007) separated anxiety into trait/non-specific anxiety, situation-specific anxiety, for example when specifically speaking in a L2, and state anxiety which is more specific to a particular moment in time. It is the situation-specific level of anxiety that is "negatively related to a wide variety of measures of L2 performance" (MacIntyre 2007, p. 565). However, according to MacIntyre (2007), it is also probable that this type of anxiety will change over time as students will either attempt to cope with the anxiety or become used to it (p. 565). A study by de Saint Leger and Storch (2009) found that university students on an Advanced French course initially felt anxiety

related to socio-cultural factors such as competition between learners and a feeling of exposure when engaged in oral interaction; however, after a period of twelve weeks, learners' anxiety had decreased and they were better able to participate in class.

To sum up, OOC learning is essential for students to progress with language acquisition. In order to undertake this type of learning, students need a certain capacity to take control of their learning and the motivation to do so. However, previous experience and previous studies have indicated that conflict between motivation to learn and anxiety may cause students to be reluctant to pursue opportunities related to interacting in the L2, in part because of a lack of confidence in their own abilities.

### 3. Methodology

This study is based on the perceptions and attitudes toward communicating in English of university students who experienced personal one-to-one twenty-minute conversation session with an English-speaking partner at English House, which is the English-speaking community space/self-access centre of Chiba University. Students were asked to take one conversation session per week over a period of eight weeks while enrolled in a sixteen-week oral communication course. During this one-to-one conversation, students were encouraged to relate the content of the one-to-one conversation to the topic of the lesson which they had attended that week.

#### 3.1 Participants

The students (n=22) involved in this study were a convenience sample of students undertaking elective, sixteen-week oral communication courses at an intermediate level, at a Japanese national university (see Table 2). At this university, students wishing to take this course need to give evidence of an intermediate level of English by having achieved an English examination score of IELTS 5, TOEFL iBT 52, TOEFL ITP 470 and TOEIC 550, although it should be born in mind that some of these scores may not reflect the students oral communication abilities reliably. In one exceptional case, Kenji, the student's TOEIC score did not meet the prerequisite level. That student was allowed to enter the class on the basis of his oral proficiency without the required examination score. The students were attending three separate classes, taught by different teachers, two from the UK and one from Australia. Participants were, at the time of the study, enrolled in a variety of departments, none of them majoring in English.

**Table 2 Student profiles**

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Nationality	Test Score	Department
1	Momo	20	Female	Japanese	TOEIC 600	Medical Systems
2	Minako	20	Female	Japanese	TOEIC 650	Chemistry
3	Risa	19	Female	Japanese	TOEIC 655	Liberal Arts & Science
4	Yoko	20	Female	Japanese	TOEIC 610	Sociology
5	Haru	20	Male	Japanese	TOEIC 870	Design Science
6	Arata	20	Male	Japanese	TOEIC 660	Engineering
7	Kenji	19	Male	Japanese	TOEIC 425	Design Science
8	Emiko	20	Female	Japanese	TOEIC 675	Liberal Arts & Science
9	Chao	19	Male	Chinese	TOEFL iBT 85	Medical Systems
10	Reika	19	Female	Japanese	TOEIC 590	Urban Environment System
11	Daisuke	19	Male	Japanese	TOEIC 650	Urban Environment System
12	Taiki	21	Male	Japanese	TOEIC 585	Urban Environment System
13	Kazuma	19	Male	Japanese	TOEIC 650	Engineering
14	Chie	19	Female	Japanese	TOEIC 625	Engineering
15	Kazuyo	21	Female	Japanese	TOEIC 900	Engineering
16	Yusuke	19	Male	Japanese	TOEIC 625	Engineering
17	Mari	20	Female	Japanese	IELTS 5.5	Horticulture
18	Noriko	20	Female	Japanese	TOEFL 523	Law
19	Tetsuo	18	Male	Japanese	TOEIC 785	Liberal Arts and Science
20	Shinji	24	Male	Japanese	TOEIC 680	Engineering
21	Hana	22	Female	Japanese	IELTS 6.0	Science
22	Ren	23	Male	Japanese	TOEIC 670	Engineering

### 3.1.1 English speaking partners

At English House, English-speaking partners known as “student assistants” are available for reserved one-to-one conversation sessions of twenty minutes each. These SAs (see Table 3) range in age from 19 to 35 and work at English House as a part-time job. They are all fluent enough in English to be able to converse without effort. In order to reserve a conversation session, students must merely write their name in a vacant time slot and then come to English House at that time.



**Table 3 Student assistants (SA) at English House**

Student Assistants					
- Female	6	- Male	11		
Degree					
- Bachelor	11	- Master	3	- PhD	3
Nationality					
- Malaysian	5	- Indonesian	3	- American	2
- Japanese	2	- German	1	- Indian	1
- Mexican	1	- Moroccan	1	- Vietnamese	1

### 3.2 Data collection instruments

As part of this qualitative study, students' perceptions and opinions were collected at the beginning and end of the period through the completion of surveys, and in a semi-structured interview at the end of the period (see Table 4). All communication was in English.

**Table 4 Data collected**

Participants	22
Initial survey questionnaire completed	18
Final survey questionnaire completed	19
Interviews conducted	22

At the beginning of the research period, a simple questionnaire concerning students' personal and educational details was administered. At the same time, a questionnaire focusing on the following issues: the extent to which participants use English, or expect to use English in the future in everyday life; participants' understanding of World Englishes; their thoughts on communicating with various English speakers; and their views on different ways to learn English, was administered in order to create a simple profile of each participant. Each item in the latter questionnaire was an open-ended question in order to allow participants to communicate their thoughts and experiences in their own words. For the purposes of this paper, only responses to the questions relating to students' use of English and their thoughts on communicating with English speakers will be used.

As well as the initial questionnaire, students were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire at the end of the course. Then a semi-structured interview was conducted to investigate issues and attitudes arising from the answers to these questionnaires and

to obtain the students' opinions about their experiences and attitudes concerning the one-to-ones. The questionnaire responses were collected and the oral interviews were transcribed. Data was ordered for each participant into pre- and post-study period questionnaire responses and oral interview responses. Data was also categorized by response to each question, and by tentative themes such as indication of international posture, or indication of anxiety. All the students participating in the study were fully informed of what they would be doing and what was involved, and all students signed a consent form both in English and Japanese attesting to the fact that they had agreed to participate.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Perceived changes in feelings of anxiety

The participants appeared to have experienced a general fall in anxiety levels over the course of the study period.

At the beginning of the investigation period, the students were given a questionnaire including the following questions: How do you feel about communicating with native speakers of English (NSE), and how do you feel about communicating with non-native speakers of English (NNSE)? They were asked to write freely in English. It should be remembered that, as many students did not frequently use English outside of the classroom, many of these impressions are likely to have been formed in class.

Eighteen students answered the former question. The answers to this question were classified into three categories: positive, negative, and in between (see Figure 1). In the positive category, there were two subcategories: "English is fun/good" and "English is important". Each of these categories consisted of two students with comments such as *"It has a lot of fun because I'm happy when I tell someone what I want to say in a foreign language and then I can feel as if I were another person."* (Taiki), or *"I feel it's important because to be English speaker, I must practice to speak English"* (Hiroshi).

Eleven students were classified as feeling negative. There were two main subcategories. Five were classified as "nervous because of their own ability" for example *"I'm nervous of communicating with NSE because I'm anxious about whether I can speak English properly"* (Kenji). A further five participants were "nervous because of features of NSE language use", such as *"Little bit uncomfortable and uneasy. It's because some native speakers speak so fast that sometimes I miss words or sentences, and they have a lot of vocabularies"* (Tetsuo). One person was generally negative – *"I think that it is not good"* (Masaru). The three remaining students mentioned both positive and

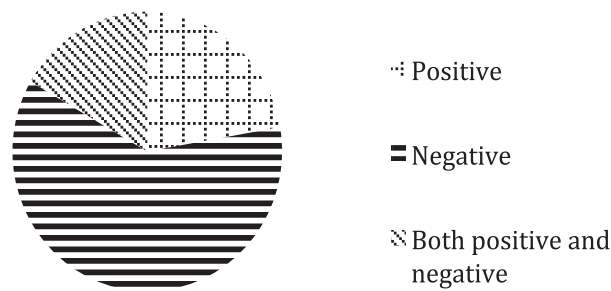


Figure 1 Students' feelings about communicating with native speakers of English (NSE)

negative features in their answers to this question. One example is, *"I feel a little nervous because I don't know whether I can make myself understood in English. But I enjoy communicating with them because I want to try my skill of English"* (Momo).

Answers to the latter question regarding communicating with NNSE were classified into positive, negative and neutral. Interestingly, of these, thirteen were generally positive, with some contrasting with communication with NSEs, possibly because of the sequencing of these questions in the questionnaire. Examples include: *"If they are non-native speakers of English and speak English very fluently, I envy them and it provoke me to study English"* (Kazuyo). *"I think it's much easier. They also study English as foreign language, so I think I have some common sense to them. Their English skill also must be limited"* (Shinji). Two answers were neutral and three were negative, two of these mentioned the difficulty of understanding the NNSE: *"That's much more difficult for me to understand what they speak. Although some of them are talented, they have different level of English skills, or accents from many countries"* (Chao). One expressed worries that the NNSE would not understand the student.

At the end of the study period, the students looked back on their experiences and their opinions were collected by means of a questionnaire and semi-structured interview. Of the five students who had said that they were nervous or worried about difficulties using English with native speakers, four of them, by the end of the period appeared to feel more positive, while three of the five who were initially worried about native speaker characteristics had become positive. The students who were initially both positive and negative expressed an improvement in their anxiety about speaking English. For example comments, see Table 5.

**Table 5 Example comments**

	Before	After
Risa	<i>A little bit nervous. I don't have confidence and I'm afraid of taking mistakes.</i>	<i>I should speak more but communication isn't so hard 1 to 1 session will use listening skills or speaking skills or communication skills ... so many skills can improve</i>
Kenji	<i>I'm nervous of communicating with NSE because I'm anxious about whether I can speak English properly.</i>	<i>The number of times when I can understand is increased. I don't feel afraid of making mistakes.</i>
Momo	<i>I feel a little nervous because I don't know whether I can make myself understood in English.</i>	<i>I'm more confident now speaking English. They are very friendly and they're as I said they always supported me, so I have no ... now I don't have hesitate to speak English.</i>

#### 4.2 Perceived changes in self-belief in L2 ability

One of the goals of the one-to-one programme is to give students the opportunity to speak in English outside the classroom in the hope that this practice will lead to an improvement in students' perception of their own efficacy using English. The final questionnaire and the interview transcripts were reviewed and compared with comments indicating student attitudes from the initial questionnaire in order to ascertain how many students perceived an improvement in their self-belief as a result of taking one-to-one sessions. Characteristics measured were perceived increase in L2 competence and perceived increase in ability to deal with anxiety, as seen in the previous section. Competence is used here to mean not necessarily L2 level as defined by test results, but the ability to deal with communication in L2. A review of the interview transcripts and post study period questionnaire found that 17 students saw some progress in their English speaking ability. One student commented *"If I do not get this chance I now... I may cannot use English well. By using this system, I feel my English is progress"* (Hiroshi).

Despite these positive results, it was clear that some students, unsurprisingly, still experience difficulty conversing in English. This was reflected in the following feedback:

*"So sometimes I couldn't give my... couldn't communicate with my poor...not good pronunciation."* (Yoko)

However, of the 13 students who, in the interview, mentioned problems with communicating their ideas, all of them also mentioned positive aspects such as improvement compared with before they started the programme, and/or a willingness to make further efforts to improve.

*"I can't explain what I thought, he tells me another words and write down on paper. I feel I can talk with him."* (Emiko)

*"Not easy, so this is because of my shortage of English skill, hearing and speaking. It is also a good chance.. I recognize my skilllessness."* (Taiki)

#### 4.3 Affective situational factors

As can be seen from the above, it seems that participants experienced an improvement in their feelings of anxiety and their self-belief in being able to cope with conversing in English. It is possible that a number of affective factors referred to by the participants in their questionnaire responses and in the oral interview contributed to these improvements.

##### 4.3.1 Sympathetic interlocutors

As well as comments related to self-belief, we also identified a common theme from comments in the final questionnaire and the interview related to the positive effect of sympathetic interlocutors. Of the 22 students interviewed, 13 mentioned the kindness or friendliness of the SA. Two examples of such comments were: *"They are very kindly, they are so friendly"* (Hiroshi), and *"Student assistants are very kind and they talk very friendly so I can talk very relax"* (Arata).

Furthermore, 17 participants mentioned that they felt comfortable, relaxed, or it was easy to speak with the SA. A comment made by Daisuke illustrates this point; *"They speak slowly and they listen my... they listen what I want to say. They are too kind. Their speaking level is too high but they teach me listen me so I take part in the communication."* Another student who felt the same was Kazuma, who said in his interview, *"I was helped many times, so they help me to communicate. So I can relax... so I can use more English and communicate... it is good."*

##### 4.3.2 International posture

Being interested in the culture of the SA and obtaining information or opinions that were new or different appeared to be another factor that affected participants and made their experience more meaningful. Almost every participant mentioned that they were either interested in learning about other countries or communicating with people from other countries and that they could get a lot of cultural knowledge from the SA. They described sessions which involved talking about cultural issues: the Indonesian

education system; comparing food waste around the world; the three largest ethnic groups in Malaysia and its language environment; Islam and the month of Ramadan; German and Japanese festivals; Moroccan culture; and ethics and gestures in the USA. In commentary on the sessions, participants remarked:

*"I learned about the cultures about other countries such as Germany, Indonesia, Morocco. It was so interesting."* (Yoko)

*"Actually, they do share their culture information about their culture from their countries about America, Malaysia, Indonesia. It opened my eye to the world."* (Chao)

*"I like talking with people from other and knowing their culture, or what they like. For example I heard about Indonesian coffee which is made in animals stomach."* (Hana)

#### 4.3.3 The OOC setting

With regard to comparing in-class (IC) with OOC experience, there were a variety of comments from students. Many students mentioned that it was easier to communicate in the one-to-one session, sometimes because the SA are closer than the teacher in age to the student. *"We are in the same generation so...closer relationship with SA than class teacher"* (Ren). Other reasons for easier communication were *"the teacher is more difficult to understand than the student assistants"* (Kenji), *"One-to-one only me so I could speak more"* (Minako); *"If the class is too big, we can't have a ... this communication"* (Ren); *"One-to-one is more normal natural than class with textbook"* (Arata), and *"More equal, and I can talk friendly with SA but I can't talk with teacher friendly"* (Arata).

On the subject of linking the class topic with the topic of conversation in their one-to-one as they had been advised, some liked the idea; *"We don't need to think of own topic"* (Mari), while others preferred to keep to freer conversation because the topic of the class may have been "boring" or "difficult" – *"Free better because theme may be boring"* (Minako). Although the majority of students liked the link between the class topics and the one-to-one, one person believed that the one-to-one sessions were not as beneficial as class; *"In English class we learn new vocabulary and practice it, but in this session we just enjoy talking... it's not like studying"* (Hana).

#### 4.4 Change in willingness to use available resources

In the initial questionnaire survey completed by participating students, eighteen students answered the question "How often do you use English outside the classroom?" The answers were categorized into "often", "sometimes", "rarely" and "never".

As can be seen from Figure 2, four students used English often outside the classroom: two used productive skills and two, receptive. Of the two who used productive skills,

one made use of the English House facility on the university campus. Another four students used English “sometimes” with one using English House, one being a member of the English Speaking Society at the university, one using English on the internet and one at work in a nearby international airport. The remaining ten students either rarely or never used English outside of the classroom. Among the answers, a recurring theme was that there was “*no opportunity*” to use English or “*no chance to talk with foreigners.*”

Responses included: “*I rarely use English outside the classroom because I live in Japan and my friends speak Japanese*” (Risa), and “*I don’t use English hardly outside the classroom because I don’t meet foreigners. Even if I meet them, I don’t speak to them*” (Mari).

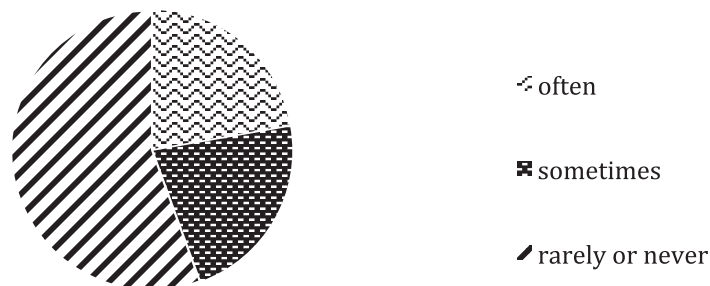
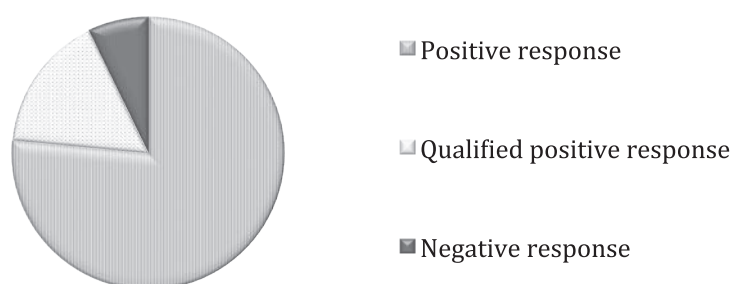


Figure 2 Students who use English outside the class

The fact that more than half of the students rarely or never use English outside of the classroom, often because of a “lack of opportunity” or lack of friends who do not speak Japanese indicates that students are either unaware of the facilities available on campus, do not use them for various reasons or perhaps have other priorities. They also seem not to utilize various other ways of using English outside the classroom.

At the end of the study period, in the final interview, the students were asked whether they would like to continue to attend English House one-to-one conversation sessions with student assistants (see Figure 3). There was a very positive response with 15 out of 22 students asked stating strongly that they would continue going to one-to-one sessions. Eleven of these mentioned either improving their English level or keeping up their level as a reason for continuing: “*I want to speak English more fluently and English House their lesson are free, it is very convenient for me... I’m going to take more one-to-one lessons in the future*” (Momo). Of the seven remaining students, one stated that he would not continue because of time pressures from his major. The others gave a qualified positive response such as “*If I have time, I want to go. I want to take one-to-one session*” (Kazuyo), or “*Yes, if there are more quantity of booking*” (Ren).





**Figure 3** Students who state they want to continue to use 1-1 sessions in the coming semester.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Causes of student anxiety

It seems from the students' responses that at the beginning of the study period they found it daunting to speak with NSEs, partly because of nervousness, but were not so anxious about speaking English with NNSEs. The factors that appeared to contribute to participant anxiety at the beginning of the period appeared to include a negative self-belief, as they saw themselves as lacking in aspects of L2 competence such as pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar, which would prevent them from making themselves understood. Also, perceived factors relating to the interlocutor such as speed of speech and level of vocabulary used by NSE or NNSE caused concern that participants would not be able to understand what was being said. Another factor was the problem of lack of experience speaking in English. Participants mentioned that they had studied in high school but that they had had few opportunities to speak, which would have contributed to the "situation-specific anxiety" postulated by McIntyre (2007). There may have been other situation-specific causes such as the possibility of being overheard by those sitting in the immediate surroundings, but these were not mentioned by respondents in this study.

### 5.2 Alleviation of student anxiety

One of the main aims of this study was to find out whether student anxiety could be alleviated by having the participants attend one-to-one sessions regularly over a period of weeks. We hypothesized that the participants would become less anxious if they became accustomed to the experience of sitting with a NSE or NNSE and speaking in English. To some extent, this hypothesis was realized, with most participants reporting feeling less anxious at the end of the study period than at the beginning. Contributing factors appear to include acclimatization to the situation, an increase in perceived



competence or coping, supportive interlocutors, and an interest in the subject or topic of the communication.

### 5.2.1 Acclimatization to the situation

Participants took eight one-to-one sessions with SAs, and while at first, many were nervous or disappointed with their performance, at the end of the period, the majority of those who specifically stated that they had been nervous claimed to be less nervous than before. Going through the process of entering English House, sitting down with the SA and conversing for 20 minutes each time, is likely to have desensitized them to issues such as anxiety about making errors when they speak or issues relating to the English House environment, such as entering a place that has been described as “difficult to enter” both in survey results (*skipwise* 2016) and in anecdotal evidence. Chie commented,

*“At first when I go to EH I couldn’t listen to how she speaking I got worried about why can I listen to her English. Every time I was disappointed. So at first I don’t like this conversation but now gradually I like to speak by English... I learnt English skill, for example vocabulary or how to say in certain situation and I learned... it is very important to try to communicate.... try myself in spite of language.”*

### 5.2.2 Increase in perceived competence

Of the 22 students who participated in the study, 17 commented on a perceived increase in their English communication skills. This may be related to the aforementioned acclimatization to a situation in which they did not need to worry about making mistakes and therefore could focus on the message of their communication. It may be that participants’ language level did not increase to any great extent, but they clearly felt that they were able to communicate more effectively by the end of the period. This more effective communication was, in some cases, achieved by making use of communication strategies such as asking for clarification, repetition or help with unknown words. Momo said *“Sometimes it too...too fast to speak English, I can not understand what they say but if I... if I when I say please again or something so they always say in other words, easy words, so I think no problems.”*

Such strategies are a normal part of communication, but students who are used to the conversations written in their high school textbooks will most likely not have experienced using them, and as many participants mentioned, they have had little opportunity for authentic communication in English. As Kenji said, *“When I was a high school student, I learned English, but it is English for exam, to pass university exam, so it isn’t English to communication. I want to learn English to communication.”* Affording the opportunity to cope with real conversation breakdown in a supportive atmosphere

will help students to realize that their communicative competence depends on more than their grammatical and lexical resources. This increase in their perception of their own competence, or in their self-agency beliefs, should lead to an increase in motivation (Kormos & Csizer, 2014).

### 5.2.3 Supportive interlocutors

One of the main contributing factors to participants feeling less anxious about speaking in English appeared to be the support of their interlocutors. In many cases, the SAs were said to be “kind” or “fun”, and helped the participants to express themselves or to understand. In addition, many of the interlocutors were NNSE. Participants commented on how this was an advantage in a speaking partner as the NNSE had the experience of learning English themselves and therefore could empathize with the participants and perhaps help them with advice on learning English. *“I can be taught by them the way to study. How they can improve their English skill. I will never know about it from a native speaker”* (Taiki). Furthermore, several students mentioned that the SAs were closer in age to them than the teacher in their class and therefore it was easier to converse and easier to find common topics of interest.

### 5.2.4 Topic interest

Having an interest in the topic of conversation affected readiness to communicate. Haru was clear that he was not interested in boring topics; *“If the contents are very interesting then um I’m so motivated to talk about the talk with SA but if not, not so... motivated.”* Similarly, Arata found talking about his own personal topics more stimulating than class topics: *“Normal English class is a little strict... using some texts. I think it’s a little boring”*. In particular, two affective variables influenced the level of interest of the participants. Firstly, speaking to SA from other countries is a popular and motivating factor in the one-to-one sessions. The participants showed a high level of interest in the international community and finding out about different cultures.

*“Well, I really like we can have experience with the communication between the different nationality or the different culture in English. For most Japanese student there is no chance to talk in English between the different nationality because most class is... is with Japanese students so we have lots of experience talking with Japanese student in English or the... or with the teacher but the experience with different nationalities is special so it is good.”* (Tetsuo)

When they were excited about a topic, for example, in this case, information about the SA’s lives, or information about their countries, participants were keen to talk about it. This enthusiasm may outweigh the anxiety felt about conversing in English as happened in Kang’s (2005) study on Korean university students studying in the USA.

The other factor was having the autonomy to choose the topic of conversation. In some cases, the participants regarded talking about the classroom topic as a valuable experience, which helped them to learn more about the topic introduced in class, while others preferred to talk about their personal topics in which they had more interest. It appeared to be important that the students had the opportunity to choose the topic of conversation rather than having one imposed on them.

### 5.3 Reactive to proactive autonomy

The results of the study indicate that the above factors are important in reducing anxiety and getting students to speak. Participants mentioned that if they had not had this opportunity they would not have used English outside the classroom at all. However, as they were able to use the facilities available, many of them reported a positive experience, an improvement in their English ability, and a willingness to continue to use the one-to-one sessions. As mentioned in section 2.2, reactive autonomy occurs when students are directed to achieve a goal and they exhibit autonomy in the way in which the goal is achieved (Littlewood, 1999; Shaver, 2012). Asking students to converse in English with a NNSE or NSE outside of the classroom could be seen as a weak form of reactive autonomy in that the goal – to enhance students’ communicative competence – is determined by the teacher as is the general method, which involves communicating with someone in English for twenty minutes. However, the way in which they achieved the goal was, to a small extent, determined by the students in that they were able to choose whether they attended, when they attended, what they talked about and whom they talked with. Having attended eight one-to-one sessions, students reported an intention to continue attending one-to-one sessions in future unrelated to class. This appears to indicate that students are willing to engage in proactive autonomy, and take more control of their own learning in the context of oral English communication.

In summary, the above could be represented in the following way (see Figure 4).

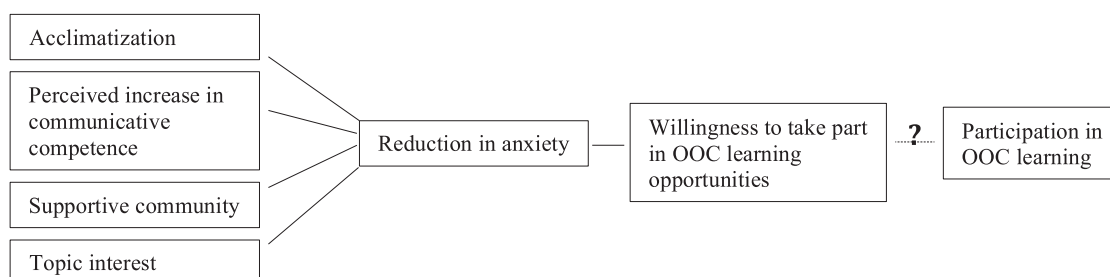


Figure 4 Factors influencing anxiety reduction in OOC learning

Whether the final step will be taken and the participants will take their learning into their own hands remains to be seen.

#### 5.4 Pedagogical Implications

This study has shown that, to some extent, student anxiety can be alleviated by encouraging students' self-belief in their ability to communicate and by providing opportunities to communicate in which the focus is on real communication rather than the impersonal communication practice provided in some textbooks. Additionally, these opportunities should allow students to focus on the message when communicating, rather than on the accuracy of their grammatical or lexical usage. This is not to say that accuracy should be ignored completely. As several participants stated, the SAs often did not correct their English, but rather helped participants to communicate the message in a different way. This mention of correction shows that some participants wanted to speak accurately and would have welcomed correction. Mari said, *"For me, I want to correct my English, but some students may think if the SA correct the English they feel more nervous to communicate in English so it depends on the person."* Partly, the extent to which students want to be corrected may depend on the level of anxiety. Chie said in her interview, *"At first, I feel I am very nervous to communicate with them, so I'm pleasure not to point out my wrong, but now I want to improve my English so I... it is better to point out."* Most teachers would agree that a combination of focus on accuracy and on fluency is needed, and there is limited time to do both in a classroom situation with 15-week terms and 30 students in the class. Therefore, OOC activities are essential to extend the time that students can use to develop their English communication abilities.

However, it is unreasonable to expect students to engage in OOC activities, or in any form of autonomous learning, without some kind of impetus and scaffolding to help them develop autonomous learning skills. There is a large difference between conversing with an SA as an integrated part of a course and taking the initiative to reserve a one-to-one session by oneself. Yoko, in her interview said, *"I was interested in the one-to-one session before... but I don't have brave to have a session. It was a good chance to start a one-to-one session and now I think one-to-one session is very interesting and funny to me so I will continue to take one-to-one session"*. As this shows, students may have the motivation to learn but may have difficulty or lack a strong enough motivation to enter the situation. In general, teachers can help by assisting students to find out what activities are available and which might suit their needs by introducing OOC learning components in their classes, or by having students do some kind of self-

directed activity as part of the class credit.

This study linked OOC conversation sessions with classroom activities by helping participants to initially reserve a one-to-one conversation session, suggesting that students talk about the class topic with their conversation partner and encouraging them to continue by starting each class with a pair discussion of what they had talked about in their one-to-one session that week. This link meant that students continued to attend one-to-one sessions and after eight weeks, saw the benefit. If the teachers had merely asked students to attend once or twice, they would have remained at the initial stage of anxiety and their negative self-belief may have been confirmed by a lack of ability to communicate their message.

Therefore, it is clear that if teachers wish more of their students to engage in OOC activities, teachers need to initially provide some structure for the activities, or even require students to complete activities outside the classroom that involve communicating in English with others and this provision and encouragement must be sustained over a period of time.

If the OOC activities involve a certain level of autonomy, for example in choice of topic or choice of task, this may encourage students to gradually move away from the teacher-led mindset developed in school towards a more autonomous attitude. These OOC activities should be interesting to students, relevant to their needs and carried out in a supportive atmosphere. Teachers should take into account the fact that if requirements are too onerous or time-consuming, students are not likely to continue to participate as they have pressures from their major subjects, part-time jobs, and club activities.

## 5.5 Future Research

This study culminated in a final interview in which the majority of students expressed a willingness to continue their OOC learning. However, whether the students actually do continue or whether they succumb to the pressures of their study schedules would be an interesting area of research. Especially, it would be useful to investigate the factors possibly preventing continuation of what participants described as a fun and useful activity. Another area of research may be a study from the student assistants' perspective of how they encourage students to speak, as this appeared to be an important factor in motivating participants to speak, and also why student assistants do or do not provide correction.

## 5.6 Limitations

This was a qualitative, longitudinal study of eight weeks' duration, involving 22 participants. A qualitative approach was taken because it provides a "rich description of dynamic process in participants' own terms" (MacIntyre, 2007). However, a number of limitations arise from this. Firstly, because of the small scale of the study, it is not possible to generalize about all factors that affect all university students' anxiety. Secondly, some of the participants were members of the researchers' own classes, which means that they may have felt an unconscious moral obligation or feeling of loyalty. This, in combination with a general disinclination among Japanese students to give negative feedback may have given the participants' responses a positive bias. A further limitation was that the questionnaires and interviews were conducted in English, which means that students may not have been able to express themselves with all the nuance and depth of meaning that they would have been able to use in their native language. As a result of these limitations, this study provides only a preliminary indication of how OOC learning influences students.

## Conclusion

This study has shown that for Japanese university students, situation-specific anxiety with relation to speaking in a second language can be alleviated to some extent by participating in OOC activities. However, this is dependent on a number of affective factors such as whether interlocutors are sympathetic to the learner or whether the student is interested in the topic of discussion. It is possible that teachers can help students to gain a more positive self-belief in their abilities if they provide and oversee opportunities for students to use their English in conversation outside of the classroom. OOC activities such as one-to-one conversation with NSE or NNSE can provide such affordances. Therefore, students should be given more help and encouragement to use all the facilities available to them.

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