

# Examining Japanese EFL University Students' Speaking Self-Confidence and Perceptions of Satisfaction in a Reading and Discussion Course

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## Abstract

This exploratory study is designed to shed light on the perceptions and experiences of a group of first-year Japanese EFL university students taking part in a Reading and Discussion course with two goals in mind: 1) to measure the effects of instruction on learners' confidence to speak in English and 2) to provide university course planners with assessment information that can help them develop practices to improve their ability to teach a specific reading and discussion course in the future. To this end, three online questionnaires were distributed to a cohort of 104 first-year Japanese EFL university students belonging to the School of Global Humanities and Social Sciences at Nagasaki University. The first questionnaire, which was designed to measure students' confidence to perform speaking tasks over time, was distributed at the start of the semester and again at the end of the semester four months later. The second and third questionnaires, which were designed to assess students' satisfaction with the course and the coursebook, were administered only at the end of the course. The findings indicate that students' self-confidence in performing oral tasks in English greatly improved across the board over the course of the semester. Moreover, the students expressed a high level of satisfaction with the course and the coursebook. Additionally, the three instructors of the Reading and Discussion I course provided their impressions of the course and where they think they can improve. Some of their suggestions included implementing more up to date materials and providing students with more communication opportunities. The authors discuss the implications of these findings and offer some suggestions moving forward. First and foremost, the authors stress the importance of monitoring students' perceptions throughout a course. In addition, course planners should always strive to use materials that are up-to-date and relevant to their students. Finally, instructors need to make concerted efforts to choose materials that best adhere to the specific needs and proficiency levels of the students in their contexts.

**Key Words:** Japanese EFL university context; reading and discussion, student perceptions of satisfaction, self-confidence, EFL coursebooks and materials

## 1. Introduction

*“Self-confidence is the foundation of all great success and achievement”.*

*– Brian Tracy, Canadian Author, CEO, and Motivational Speaker –*

The Oxford Dictionary (n.d.) defines self-confidence as “confidence in yourself and your abilities.” While many Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL hereafter) learners may indeed have the ability to produce coherent oral output, a lack of self-confidence in doing so often results in reticent behavior and deprives them of the chance to develop in this area (Anderson, 2019). In our opinion, however, the reasons for Japanese people to learn and be able to function in English have increased exponentially in the current age of globalization. English has grown in modern times to become the international language for communication used in such fields as business, international politics, academics, and science. When it comes to Japan, English proficiency has become a common requirement for employment in Japan and is considered important in building a successful career (Morita, 2017; Nikolova, 2008). Morita (2017) explains that with a rapidly aging and declining population, the Japanese need to be able to work with foreign co-workers. Being competent in English would also help Japanese people form alliances and partnerships with foreign establishments in business, research, higher education, and science and technology. In other words, for Japan to truly internationalize, English will have to play an important role. This is known from the fact that many companies in Japan offer their employees incentives for achieving designated scores on various English proficiency tests such as the EIKEN test (Test in Practical English Proficiency), Test of English for Intercultural Communication, and Test of English as a Foreign Language (hereafter, TOEFL). Although Japanese people seem to have many good reasons to study English, and despite the fact that Japan as a nation has expended vast resources on the study of English, the learning outcome has been markedly inadequate, particularly in the area where speaking skills are concerned.

## 2. A Review of the Literature

### *Reading and Discussion*

The four language skills are typically grouped into receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing) skill categories. In educational contexts, however,

it has traditionally been more common to see each of the four skills taught independently, or for them to be paired communicatively as reading/writing and listening/speaking subjects (Peregoy & Boyle, 1991). Thus, reading and discussion (i.e., speaking) have generally been taught separately in Japanese EFL classes, and according to Gentner (2019), pairings or combinations of reading and discussion have rarely been studied or discussed in the research literature. In explaining how reading can affect a learner's speaking performance, Grabe (1991: 379) puts forward the following six component skills and knowledge areas involved in reading tasks: automatic recognition skills, vocabulary and structural knowledge, formal discourse structure knowledge, content/world background knowledge, synthesis and evaluation skills/strategies, and meta-cognitive knowledge and skills monitoring. Therefore, reading exposes learners to models of language and enables them to build their receptive knowledge and skills, which they can, in turn, attempt to use in subsequent oral output. In a recent study of 150 Thai university students, Gentner (2019) found that oral narratives read from online materials proved to be an efficient blend of receptive reading and productive speaking performances that found favor with participants as task models.

Language acquisition without reading is difficult. According to Krashen and Terrel (1983: 131), "reading may contribute significantly to competence in a second language. There is good reason, in fact, to hypothesize that reading makes a contribution to overall competence, to all four skills. Bright and McGregor (1970: 52) assert that "Where there is little reading there will be little language learning. ... the student who wants to learn English will have to read himself into a knowledge of it unless he (sic) can move into an English environment." Thus, reading is often seen as the launching point for effective output to eventually occur. According to Mart (2012), one of the best ways to improve one's communication skills is extensive reading. Extensive reading helps learners to improve their abilities to express ideas, whilst also enlarging the size of their vocabularies. Moreover, as Mart (2012) adds, vocabulary knowledge is one of the vital factors that will affect fluency in speaking. Reading introduces learners to a wider body of language and contexts and helps them develop grammatical competence. Hence, as learners develop stronger reading skills, they develop more sophisticated speaking skills.

### *Focus on Speaking/Discussion*

The previous section has established the importance of reading and how it can directly impact speaking/discussion skills. In this section, the authors will explain why they

have chosen learners' self-confidence in performing speaking/discussion tasks as the focus of this study. First, as Mart (2012: 91) points out, "speaking holds a very significant place in foreign language learning because through speech messages are conveyed". Ur (1996: 120) stipulates that "of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important." According to Davies and Pearse (2000: 424), "Real success in English teaching and learning is when the learners can actually communicate in English inside and outside the classroom."

Another reason why speaking/discussion skills are the focus of this investigation is that this is the area that Japanese EFL students have the greatest trouble with. This is reflected by the fact that Japanese TOEFL iBT test takers consistently score lower in the Speaking section than in the Listening, Reading, and Writing sections (ETS, 2020; Nath, 2022; Nippon.com, 2019). Additionally, many scholars have noted that the common Japanese high school graduate is seriously incompetent as an English speaker (Christopher, 2020; Cutrone, 2009; Farooq, 2005; Reesor, 2002, Roger, 2008; Takanashi, 2004; Yano, 2001). In English Language Teaching (hereafter, ELT) materials designed for university classes, Japanese students are often described as *false beginners* (Helgesen, Brown, & Mandeville, 2007; Helgesen, Wiltshier, & Brown, 2018; Martin, 2003). This classification means that while most students can read basic texts and have a background in English based on their study of grammar and translation in junior and senior high school, their speaking skills are limited.

#### *Communicative Self-Confidence in the Japanese EFL Context*

Ultimately, students' speaking will need to be assessed based on their performances in terms of fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, syntactic and lexical complexity, etc. In this exploratory study, however, the authors focus on examining learners' communicative self-confidence, which is believed to be the first step to developing effective communication skills (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Self-confidence can help students overcome the anxiety coming from socio-cultural factors. In other words, some students may indeed have the English ability to produce oral output but choose not to for any number of reasons. For instance, some students may not want to speak up in class discussions because they do not want to draw attention to themselves and/or stand out amongst their peers (Cutrone, 2009). In addition, as Hidasi (2004) remarked, many Japanese students entering universities simply do not have much experience speaking in their classes. Due to the make-up of entrance examinations (and the washback effect that ensues), the nature of the curriculum

and instruction in Japanese primary and secondary schools for the most part is teacher-led and has not been very communicative (Allen, 2016). Finally, there is a wealth of literature that discusses how Japanese society generally tends to favor reticent, passive, and obedient students (Doyon, 2000; McVeigh, 2001; Sato, 2008). However, sometimes, such claims are based on anecdotal accounts and/or are cast in an essentialist light, and, thus, the authors would like to exercise great caution to not further perpetuate the “Japanese do not like to speak” stereotype. This needs to be kept in mind when discussing Japanese student self-confidence.

According to Anderson (1993, 2019), Japanese EFL students will be more willing to communicate in class if they are confident and made to feel comfortable. This involves educators making a concerted effort to help learners decrease their communicative inhibitions (i.e., foreign language anxiety) and increase their self-confidence to speak in English. Concerning the former, in an earlier paper, Cutrone (2009) discussed foreign language anxiety and offered some suggestions to help Japanese EFL learners overcome their fear of speaking. Specifically, Cutrone (2009) suggests that EFL teachers in Japan strive towards making their classrooms more intimate (i.e., less formal), and move away from the evaluation paradigm. Further, foreign EFL teachers in Japan would benefit from learning as much as possible about Japanese society and culture, so as to better understand how these factors may influence learners when speaking a foreign language.

In a study of 28 Indonesian EFL university students, Tridinanti (2018) investigated the correlation between speaking anxiety, self-confidence, and speaking achievement and found that self-confidence had a significant correlation with speaking achievement, whereas speaking anxiety had no significant correlation with speaking achievement. Hence, the more self-confidence students seem to have, the more they likely will speak; the more they speak, the more opportunities they will have to improve their speaking (Chou, 2018; Yanagi & Baker, 2016). As Chou (2021) has outlined in specific terms, the process of producing more oral output allows students additional opportunities to enhance their quality of speech (especially in content, vocabulary use, and fluency), strengthen components of speaking competence (more frequent use of speaking skills and communication strategies), and raise learner awareness of metacognition (self-monitoring and self-regulation at the end of the speaking tasks) to various degrees.

### *The Value of Soliciting Students' Opinions*

In this section, the authors turn their attention to the aspect of this study that deals

with students' perceptions of a reading and discussion course. The focus of the current study on students' perceptions of their own performance and success in the course reflects the central importance of *self-reflection* in Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory of self-efficacy. Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy concerns students' perceptions of their degree of success in accomplishing learning tasks, and he found this perception was an indicator of future success. Bandura (1997) found learners develop self-efficacy through mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasions, and affective indicators. Of particular relevance to the current study, Bandura (1997) found that vicarious experiences, such as observing non-native peers successfully communicate in a foreign language, empower students in foreign language learning settings. This image of a peer's success increases self-efficacy by enabling them to envision their own future proficiency. In other words, when students in a reading and discussion course bear witness to their peers' development, this will serve to give them a boost in self-confidence.

Student perceptions of a course are useful for instructors in a myriad of ways. First, students' feedback on (or during) a course can serve to help instructors immediately improve upon their teaching practices (Minero, 2016). For instance, instructors can gain valuable information on whether the teaching methods and/or the course materials are well-suited (or not) for a particular group of students and adapt accordingly. Several studies have shown that student engagement is related to their satisfaction, experience, learning outcomes, and achievements (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Teng & Zhang, 2018, 2020). Soliciting learners' opinions can also have a more far-reaching impact on teacher development. That is, teachers can adjust their expectations to better reflect the students in their context by identifying different viewpoints and gaining a deeper understanding of their students' psyches. According to The Iris Center (2012), teachers need to realize that their perceptions (and misperceptions) can positively or negatively shape their expectations for students, which, in turn, can influence students' performance in the classroom.

### *Research Questions*

The aims of this exploratory study are to shed light on the progress and experiences of a group of first-year Japanese EFL university students. The following research questions have been formulated specifically to measure the effects of instruction on learners' self-confidence to speak in English and to provide administrators and instructors with assessment information that can help them develop practices to improve their ability to

teach a reading and discussion course moving forward:

RQ 1: How did the English courses administered in the Spring Semester (such as Reading and Discussion I) potentially influence students' self-confidence to speak English in small group settings?

RQ 2: How did the students feel about the Reading and Discussion I course?

RQ 3: How did the students feel about the coursebook *In Focus 2* used in the Reading and Discussion I course?

To answer these questions, the authors employed a mixed-methods approach using quantitative and qualitative analyses, as described and reported in the following sections.

### 3. Methodology

#### *Participants*

Data was solicited from a cohort of 104 first-year Japanese EFL university students (female, N=72; male, N=32) belonging to the School of Global Humanities and Social Sciences (SGHSS) at Nagasaki University. However, only 89-94 students participated in various aspects of this study. In students' first two years of study in the SGHSS, English studies are a central focus of the curriculum. At the time of the study, participants' level of English proficiency, in approximate terms, ranged from upper beginner to lower advanced (i.e., scores on the TOEFL ITP taken in the middle of the semester ranged from 427-630). At the start of the study, students were between 18 and 20 years old, and 101 were in their first year of study, while three were in their second year.

Participating of their free will and understanding the nature of the study, all participants were given instructions regarding this study and their role in it. The participants constituted an opportunistic sample in that the researchers included students that were easily accessible to them and willing to participate in the study. Students were free to skip parts of or withdraw from the study at any time they wished. In referring to participants, pseudonyms are used and concerted efforts will be made to protect participants' privacy at all times.



*Procedure: Reading and Discussion I Course*

Reading and Discussion I is an EFL course that was taught via one 90-minute class each week over the course of fifteen weeks. The 104 students, divided into three classes, were taught by three different teachers. The goals of the course were the same across all three classes, as follows:

- to develop students' knowledge in the fields of global humanities and social sciences through a range of reading and discussion topics,
- to help students acquire vocabulary and develop English skills in the areas of reading and discussion,
- to help students develop the ability to exchange ideas and opinions with classmates about a wide range of topics related to their studies,
- to develop students' discussion skills in English, including how to give one's opinion, support one's opinions, ask follow-up questions, initiate repair strategies, interject, disagree, etc.

The coursebook was *In Focus 2: A Vocabulary, Reading and Critical Thinking course* (Browne, Culligan & Phillips, 2014). In each class, the instructors led students through one of the twelve units in the coursebook, which combines reading texts with corresponding discussion activities.

By and large, the instructors attempted to employ a flipped learning approach. This is a type of pedagogical approach in which students are initially introduced to the learning material before class with classroom time then being used to deepen understanding through discussion with peers (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2015). In specific terms, students in the Reading and Discussion I course were able to explore the topics (and vocabulary) of each unit before class by completing the reading exercises that the teacher had assigned. Subsequently, in class, students were given opportunities to apply various aspects of what they had learned by participating in discussions and/or problem-solving tasks involving the topics they had read about. The teacher's role was, thus, mainly to facilitate discussions and provide feedback. One of the three teachers in this course, however, began the course by giving students some class time to read the material. Eventually, as shown in the results and teachers' comments, that teacher also ended up giving the readings as homework assignments.

The instructors generally assign the two readings (and exercises corresponding to them) found at the beginning of each unit for homework. These assignments help students develop core vocabulary, which is contextualized in each passage, as well as their reading

skills. The reading activities progress from surface information useful for answering comprehension questions toward the development of deeper critical skills. Tasks include predicting, making inferences, skimming for information, scanning for details, identifying reference words, understanding the author's viewpoints, and identifying cause and effect. By reading these passages and completing the exercises corresponding to them before class, students are able to personalize the text by drawing conclusions and are, thus, more ready to take that all-important next step of sharing their opinions when they subsequently engage in discussions with their classmates. In class, students actively participate in a range of problem-solving, information-gap, and information-exchange activities related to the topic of the readings in each unit. Within this framework, students have an opportunity to develop critical thinking, skills such as identifying facts and opinions, understanding different patterns of reasoning, analyzing graphs and charts, and categorizing data.

*Context of Study: Other English Courses Seemingly Affected Self-Confidence Levels*

While the focus of this paper is on the Reading and Discussion I course, it is useful to provide a brief description of the entire English program. In 2022, the SGHSS launched the KEY Program, which is designed to help students, ultimately, reach an advanced proficiency level in English. In the short term, the SGHSS requires that students reach a minimum threshold ( $\geq 500$  on TOEFL ITP or  $\geq 5.5$  on IELTS) to be able to take academic courses in English offered for their major. In the KEY program, students take courses such as Reading and Writing I and II, Listening and Speaking I and II, and an IELTS preparation course in their first year and Academic Writing I and II, Mechanism and Meaning I and II, and Debate in their second year (for more information about the KEY program, see Nishikawa et al., in press).

The Reading and Discussion I course was taken in the first semester of students' first year. Other English courses that students took during this time include Reading and Writing I and Listening and Speaking I. Reading and Writing I and Speaking and Listening I were each taught via two 90-minute classes a week over the course of fifteen weeks. Since all these courses were taught in English and afforded students opportunities to use English, they likely contributed to some degree to any self-confidence gains that students felt in carrying out discussions. In particular, the Listening and Speaking I course, in which students often performed oral tasks in academic contexts, seems to have had a positive influence on students' self-confidence in carrying out oral tasks.

### *Data Collection*

The authors considered the best way to solicit students' opinions. As Shea (2017) asserts, to get an honest assessment from students, every effort must be made to mitigate potential biases. For instance, if students are required to provide identifying information on their questionnaires, they will be more inclined to frame their views in a positive light. This is especially true if the questionnaires are administered before the final grades have been submitted. While making such surveys anonymous would seem to be a viable solution, not all teachers would agree with this. That is, when students do not take responsibility for their own opinion, there is a danger that some may issue irresponsible claims. Nonetheless, this, too, can provide valuable information about the maturity and mindset of students in a particular context. Ultimately, for research purposes, it is imperative that surveys be anonymous if they are to have any validity at all. Finally, it is also useful for such surveys to be conducted in the learners' L1 (Ibrahim, 2019; Wilken, 2018). To encourage honest and in-depth responses, it is important that the students are made to feel as comfortable as possible. Additionally, students should not feel as though they (or their English proficiency) are being evaluated.

In this study, the final questionnaires in which students were required to share potentially sensitive and/or critical feelings about the course and the coursebook included Japanese translations and were done anonymously. However, the pre- and post-treatment self-confidence questionnaires were presented only in English because these questionnaires were directly related to the units in the coursebook, which were also presented only in English. In other words, part of the assessment of self-confidence relative to these units was how well students could function in an all-English environment, so it made sense to do it this way. Moreover, in the pre- and post-treatment self-confidence questionnaires, students were required to include identifying information. Since the researchers would compare students' self-confidence levels at the beginning and the end of the semester, it was necessary to be able to identify (and match) the students and their self-ratings in this aspect of the study. However, as the authors mentioned above, concerted efforts have been made to always protect participants' privacy.

The data collection procedure of the current study simply involved distributing online questionnaires to participants of this study. There were three questionnaires used in this study, and all were created using Google Forms. The first questionnaire (see Appendix 1), which was designed to measure students' self-confidence to perform speaking tasks over time, contained 21 items and was distributed at the start and end of the semester. The

first three items of this questionnaire sought to collect labeling information, such as the date the questionnaire was completed, and the name and student number of the participant. Subsequently, all 18 core questions on the questionnaire were comprised of closed-ended questions, with statements on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not confident at all) to 7 (extremely confident). These 18 items designed to collect data about students' self-confidence were divided into two categories of assessment: 6 items related to speaking self-confidence when performing general tasks, and 12 items related to speaking self-confidence when performing specific topics covered in the Reading and Discussion I course. The first six items on the questionnaire, thus, posed questions designed to assess students' self-confidence in performing a wide array of general oral tasks such as when they provide information about themselves, provide information and explanation about Japanese culture, seek advice about something they do not know much about, give advice about something they know well, make comparisons and state preferences about a topic they know well, and share their opinion about a topic they know well.

The remaining 12 items assessed students' confidence levels in discussing specific topics presented in each unit of the Reading and Discussion I coursebook (*In Focus 2*, by Browne, Culligan & Phillips, 2014), which included talking about English as a global language, aging populations, drugs/cheating in sports and other aspects of life, solutions to global warming, different impressions of beauty, vegetarianism (and food preferences), disappearing languages (and possible negative effects of globalization), overpopulation, salaries of professional athletes (and other occupations), global warming opinions and debates, physical appearance (including tattoos, plastic surgery, etc.), and the factory farming of animals. Since they were directly attributed to students' feelings about the course, the other two questionnaires included Japanese translations for all items; however, since this first questionnaire was designed to assess students' confidence in their English proficiency, the items in the questionnaire were composed only in English. This questionnaire was given to students at the start of the semester (in the first two weeks of April) and again at the end of the semester (at the end of July). Each time, it took students approximately ten minutes to complete.

The second and third questionnaires, which were designed to assess students' satisfaction with the course and coursebook respectively, were administered at the end of the semester (i.e., at the end of July). In creating these questionnaires, the three instructors of the Reading and Discussion I course engaged in discussions regarding what they wanted to glean from the surveys and then decided upon on each of the items to be included in

the questionnaire accordingly. Items such as *useless/useful*, *uninformative/informative*, *boring/interesting*, *confusing/clear*, *difficult/easy*, *short/long* (and *cheap/expensive* for the coursebook only) were, thus, chosen because these were deemed key areas that would help inform the instructors' choices about the course moving forward. Following some general guidelines (DeFranzo, n.d.), the instructors designed these questionnaires to be short, clear, informative, and confidential. They also decided to administer the questionnaires online, as they wanted to make the process as convenient and flexible for students as possible. Moreover, the instructors used a (7-point) Likert scale in their survey because it is easy to understand, does not take a great deal of time to complete, and presents well on computers and mobile devices (Joshi et al., 2015). Respondents have choices without becoming overwhelmed. Lastly, as we have discussed in detail above, to make the students as comfortable as possible, the instructors decided to administer these questionnaires in both Japanese and English.

Specifically, the second questionnaire, which was designed to assess the course, contained nine items in total (see Appendix 2). The first two items asked for the class name and date. To enable the students to feel comfortable and answer freely, respondents could answer anonymously, as there were no questions in which students had to identify themselves. The following six core questions were comprised of closed-ended questions, with statements on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7 in the following binary categories respectively: *useless/useful*, *uninformative/informative*, *boring/interesting*, *confusing/clear*, *difficult/easy*, and *short/long*. The seventh and final item of the questionnaire, which asked respondents if they had any other general comments about the course, was open-ended.

The third questionnaire, which was designed to assess the coursebook, contained ten items in total (see Appendix 3). While referring to the coursebook rather than the course, nine of the ten items were identical to those used in assessing the course. The only difference was the inclusion of a question that asked respondents to express their feelings about the price of the book. This was a closed-ended seven-point Likert-scale item ranging from *cheap* (1) to *expensive* (7). Lastly, at the end of the course, the three instructors of the Reading and Discussion I course were asked to provide their overall impressions of the course and where they think they can improve. This was done via email exchanges.

### *Data Analysis*

Data produced in this study were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative data were analyzed with JASP (2022). Both inferential and descriptive statis-

tics were used to analyze the quantitative data of this study. To address Research Question 1, since some of the distributions did not meet the normality assumption (on the Shapiro-Wilk test), we computed medians and interquartile ranges (IQR) to describe the data and employed non-parametric inferential tests to assess the significance of the results. That is, we carried out a series of Wilcoxon Signed-Rank tests to determine any differences in speaking self-confidence from the pre-test to the post-test. An index of  $r$  was computed to assess the effect size for the analyses. According to the benchmarks set forth by Plonsky and Oswald (2014),  $r$  values of .25, .40, and .60 were interpreted as small, medium, and large, respectively. The level of significance was set at .05.

Moreover, to address the cross-sectional results of Research Questions 2 and 3, the researchers employ descriptive statistics to present some of the salient features and trends found in the data. The mean and standard deviation, along with the minimum and maximum ratings, for each of the closed-ended questions were calculated and will be shown. The qualitative data derived from student responses to the final open-ended questions of the second and third questionnaires, as well as the teachers' comments, will be presented according to how they inform the key issues of this study.

## 4. Results

### *Students' Self-Confidence Levels Over Time*

Although questionnaires were distributed to a cohort of 104 students, only 92 students completed the self-confidence questionnaires both at the start and end of the course (i.e., the ones who did not complete one or both of the pre- and post-treatment self-confidence questionnaires were not included in the data shown in Table 1). Table 1 shows the following statistics: the pre- and post-treatment medians (Md) and IQR of the respondents' speaking self-confidence scores on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not confident at all) to 7 (extremely confident). In addition, Table 1 includes  $W$  (the Wilcoxon test statistic),  $z$  (the critical  $z$ -value for 95 % self-confidence interval),  $p$  (converted  $z$ -scores that reflect the probability that the null hypothesis is true), and  $r$  (showing effect sizes using rank-biserial correlations) scores. Therefore, as shown in Table 1, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank tests demonstrated that students were significantly more confident performing oral tasks in the post-test, as compared to the pre-test ( $p < .001$  for all 18 items). Further, the effect sizes were large ( $r > .60$ ) for 17 of 18 of the items shown below. The only item that was slightly below this threshold was Item 5, which had a medium effect size ( $r = .541$ ).

Moreover, the effect sizes pertaining to items that dealt with the specific topics of the Reading and Discussion I class (items 7-18) were noticeably higher in most cases than those pertaining to items that asked about general tasks (items 1-6). The average effect size  $r$  score for items 1-6 was  $-0.726$ , while the average effect size  $r$  score for items 7-18 was  $-0.864$ . The larger the effect size, the more practical significance we can assume. Lastly, by and large, the IQR scores for 16 of 18 items were between 1 and 2, which indicates the middle values tended to cluster. Item 6 *Sharing opinions about unfamiliar topics*, Item 8 *English as a global language*, and Item 10 *Solutions to global warming* were the only items that had IQRs greater than 2 (of 3, 3, and 2.25 respectively), indicating that there was a greater disparity in self-confidence levels in those items (as the central portion of data spread out further).

**Table 1**  
*Speaking Self-Confidence Scores at the Start and End of the Spring Semester Using Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Tests*

Category	N = 92	Pre-test Md (IQR)	Post-test Md (IQR)	W	z	p	r
<b>Talking about general topics, as follows:</b>							
1. Providing info about yourself		5 (2)	5 (2)	402	-4.816	<.001	-.667
2. Providing info about Japanese culture		4 (2)	5 (1)	272.5	-5.845	<.001	-.793
3. Seeking advice about unfamiliar topics		4 (2)	5 (2)	636.5	-4.046	<.001	-.541
4. Giving advice about familiar topics		4.5 (2)	5 (1)	539.5	-4.676	<.001	-.621
5. Stating preferences about familiar topics		4 (2)	5 (1)	217.5	-6.59	<.001	-.859
6. Sharing opinions about familiar topics		5 (3)	6 (1)	148	-6.335	<.001	-.877
<b>Talking about specific topics covered in Reading and Discussion I class, as follows:</b>							
7. English as a global language		3 (3)	5 (2)	247.5	-6.512	<.001	-.843
8. Aging populations		3 (1.25)	5 (1.25)	151	-6.661	<.001	-.891
9. Cheating in sports		3 (2)	5 (2)	159.5	-6.814	<.001	-.894
10. Solutions to global warming		4 (2.25)	5 (2)	290	-6.073	<.001	-.802
11. Differing perspectives of beauty		3 (3)	5 (2)	184	-6.952	<.001	-.889
12. Vegetarianism and food preferences		3 (2)	5 (2)	183.5	-6.486	<.001	-.868
13. Negative effects of globalization (such as disappearing languages)		3 (2)	5 (2)	74	-7.191	<.001	-.949
14. Overpopulation		3.5 (1.25)	5 (2)	235	-5.896	<.001	-.811
15. Salaries of professional athletes vis-à-vis other occupations (i.e., values in society)		3 (2)	4 (2.25)	309	-6.134	<.001	-.799
16. Global warming issues and debates from various perspectives		3.5 (2)	5 (2)	252.5	-5.794	<.001	-.797
17. Physical appearance and thoughts about tattoos, plastic surgery, etc		3 (2)	5 (2)	169	-6.959	<.001	-.896
18. Factory farming of animals		3 (2)	5 (2)	119.5	-7.197	<.001	-.926

### *Students' Evaluations of the Course*

Questionnaires were distributed to a cohort of 104 students; however, only 94 students completed the Course Satisfaction questionnaire at the end of the course. Regarding how participants felt about the Reading and Discussion I course, Table 2 reports the means, standard deviations (SDs), minimum, and maximum ratings of a list of items on Likert scales that include the binary categories *useless* (1) / *useful* (7), *uninformative* (1) / *informative* (7), *boring* (1) / *interesting* (7), *confusing* (1) / *clear* (7), *difficult* (1) / *easy* (7), and *short* (1) / *long* (7). As shown in Table 2 below, the scores were all positive. That is, the majority of students found the class to be useful, informative, interesting, and clear.

Although the mean score for the latter item *clear* was also quite high (5.936), it is notable that it is slightly lower than the previous three categories that measured satisfaction. Further, unlike the first four items in which the desired score was seven, a positive rating for Items 5 and 6 would be a neutral score of four (i.e., not too easy and not too difficult, and not too short and not too long, respectively). Hence, while scores of 4.606 and 4.106 are generally quite positive overall, the score for Item 5 is far enough away from the neutral rank of four (.606) to at least warrant some further consideration.

**Table 2**  
*Students' Satisfaction Scores Pertaining to Reading and Discussion I Course*

Category	N = 94	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
1. Useless/Useful		6.827	.863	4	7
2. Uninformative/Informative		6.362	.866	3	7
3. Boring/Interesting		6.117	1.125	1	7
4. Confusing/Clear		5.936	1.153	3	7
5. Easy/Difficult		4.606	1.138	2	7
6. Too short/Too long		4.106	.451	3	6

Most students did not respond to the final (optional) open-ended question. However, the ones who did generally shared positive remarks about the class, as follows:

*Student A: That was a very fun class.*

*Student B: Great class.*

*Student C: This was my favorite class.*



*Student D: I can say my opinion in English with confidence through (sic) the class!*

Similar to the feelings expressed by Student D, several respondents liked being afforded the opportunity to have discussions in class, as follows:

*Student E: Discussion in this class was so fun.*

*Student F: I enjoyed the discussions in this class.*

*Student G: I was very happy to have many discussions with my classmates, too.*

*Student H: I thought the group discussions were very fun because we could exchange ideas with one another.*

A few responses showed students' appreciation for the topics covered in class, as follows:

*Student I: I can get much knowledges (sic) from each topics (sic).*

*Student J: 同じトピックについて異なる視点からディスカッション出来た点がとても面白かった。  
[It was very interesting to be able to discuss the same topic from different perspectives.]*

*Student K: Thank you for teach (sic) us a lot of things. I can think (sic) a lot of topic (sic) through this class.*

Other comments reflected students' satisfaction with the teacher and/or methods used in class, as follows:

*Student L: The projects were interesting.*

*Student M: 先生が優しく意見を聞いてくれて話しやすかった。楽しかったです。  
[(Teacher's name) always kindly listened to my opinion. The class was so fun.]*

*Student N: It was easy for me to know what I should do for an assignment because (teacher's name) always sent us messages.*

Some students expressed areas that they had difficulties with, or thought could be improved. The following two excerpts demonstrate students' desire for more discussion time, as follows:

*Student O: I wanted more time to discuss in my group.*

*Student P: I wish we had this class twice a week, so we could discuss more.*

Concerning areas for potential improvement, the final four statements were varied, as follows:

*Student Q: Vocabularies on (sic) the textbook was a little difficult for me.*

*Student R: When we discuss something, we should change group members every time.*

*Student S: データを使うプレゼンテーションなどをもっと効率よく改善してほしいです。  
[I would like to see presentations that use data more efficiently.]*

*Student T: 評価をみんなにもみられてしまうのが怖かったです。  
[I was afraid that everyone would see my evaluation.]*

Regarding the final two comments, more context would seem to be needed to address them specifically. However, since these questionnaires were completed anonymously, it was not possible to follow up on what the students meant exactly. Nonetheless, in general terms, these sentiments and other areas for improvement will be discussed below.

### *Students' Evaluations of the Coursebook*

While questionnaires were distributed to a cohort of 104 students, only 89 students completed the Coursebook Satisfaction questionnaire at the end of the course. Concerning how participants felt about the *In Focus 2* (Browne, Culligan & Phillips, 2014) coursebook, Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations (SDs), minimum, and maximum ratings

of a list of items on Likert scales that include the binary categories *useless* (1) / *useful* (7), *uninformative* (1) / *informative* (7), *boring* (1) / *interesting* (7), *confusing* (1) / *clear* (7), *difficult* (1) / *easy* (7), *short* (1) / *long* (7), and *cheap* (1) / *expensive* (7). Similar to how students felt about the course in general, the mean ratings for the coursebook were quite positive overall. However, besides the score for Item 5 (easy/difficult), the other items were all rated slightly more positive for the course than for the coursebook. Additionally, the mean rating of Item 7, the item added to the coursebook questionnaire (expensive/cheap), was very near the desired target of 4.

**Table 3**  
*Students' Satisfaction Scores Pertaining to In Focus 2 Coursebook*

Category	N = 89	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
1. Useless/Useful		6.056	1.122	1	7
2. Uninformative/Informative		6.112	1.102	1	7
3. Boring/Interesting		5.719	1.261	1	7
4. Confusing/Clear		5.775	1.009	3	7
5. Easy/Difficult		4.539	1.098	2	7
6. Too short/Too long		4.079	.482	3	6
7. Expensive/Cheap		3.910	.701	1	6

While the results in Table 3 showed that the coursebook was generally perceived to be effective in all categories, the few comments that were received corresponding to the final open-ended item in the questionnaire were somewhat more equally distributed between positive and negative ones. In the following two excerpts, students, again, express their appreciation of the way the topics in the book were presented to them:

*Student A: I liked how the textbook was divided into two parts and could think about the same topic again. I could think more deeply in (sic) the second time, and since there are some keywords that we have already learned in (sic) the first time, it was easier for us to do the discussion, too.*

*Student B: The topics were useful for us, and I like the way they were presented clearly in the book. It was fun.*

A few students commented that the coursebook enabled them to expand their knowledge base, as follows:

*Student C: I thought this book had many interesting chapters and it gave me a lot of new general knowledge.*

*Student D: I was glad that I could build my knowledge with this book.*

The following three statements demonstrate how some students like the visual elements of the book:

*Student E: There are many illustrations on (sic) the books, so it is comprehensive.*

*Student F: 写真や絵を含んでおり、とてもよかった。*

*[The photos and drawings included were very good.]*

*Student G: イラストが面白かったし、単語の勉強もできた。*

*[The illustrations were interesting, and I was able to study vocabulary.]*

Some students, however, expressed some dissatisfaction with various elements of the coursebook. The following three responses express displeasure with some of the contents of the book:

*Student H: この教科書の内容で実力はつかないと思う。*

*[I don't think the contents of this textbook will give me the ability to get better.]*

*Student I: 似かよったトピックが多いと思った。*

*[I think there are many similar topics.]*

*Student J: I think some topics (like getting married and having a child) are not suitable in (sic) these days that diversity is considered important.*

Furthermore, the following two statements offer suggestions on areas for improvement:

*Student K: 最初慣れるまでは、質問の意味が分かりづらい。collocationなどの比較的習熟されていないと思われる質問には、注釈をつけてくれた方が一度で理解できると思った。[The*

*meaning of the question is hard to understand until you get used to it. For questions (sic) that seem relatively unfamiliar, such as collocation, I thought it would be easier to understand at once if you added annotations.]*

*Student L: もう少し丁寧に解説してほしかった。*

*[I would have liked more in-depth explanations.]*

Lastly, the following excerpt demonstrates the difficulty one student had in accessing the supplementary online videos of the coursebook:

*Student M: 自分のアカウントの登録はできたものの、マイページから動画を見ることができなかった。[I was able to register my account, but I couldn't watch the video from my page.]*

Due to time constraints, accessing the supplementary online material of the coursebook was not required for the course. However, some students, such as Student J, chose to do this on their own.

#### *Teachers' Comments and Suggestions*

To complete the picture, it is useful to solicit the opinions of the teachers of this course. Accordingly, the three teachers of the Reading and Discussion I course offer their thoughts on the course and areas for improvement in the future. The following responses provide details of this:

*Teacher A: I enjoyed teaching this course because I feel that speaking is the skill that students need the most. The schematic knowledge and vocabulary students obtain from the reading passages and exercises are directly transferable to their oral output. As a teacher, it is gratifying to see this process play out and, ultimately, result in students articulating coherent opinions on a wide array of topics. Although I generally like the book and how it is set up, I find it a bit outdated. Thus, if an updated version is not published in the near future, I may start to explore using a more up-to-date coursebook that better reflects current global issues.*

*Teacher B: In general, I thought the class went quite well. The one thing I would do differently is to spend more class time on building discussion skills and a bit less on the*

*reading parts. It was quite clear that students' ability to read and understand academic texts is far superior to their ability to discuss such topics. Although time restraints make it somewhat difficult to do everything I want to do in this course, I would like to better integrate the online supplementary material into the course syllabus.*

*Teacher C: I liked teaching this class a lot because I could see the students improve right before my very eyes. It is so clear that what these students really needed are meaningful opportunities to communicate in English, and this class afforded them ample opportunities to do so.*

The teachers' comments, combined with the students' ratings and responses, help shed light on how the Reading and Discussion I course can be improved in the future. To this end, the following section will discuss the implications of these findings and offer some practical suggestions moving forward.

## 5. Summary and Implications

In summarizing and interpreting the findings of this current study, RQs 1, 2, and 3 are answered and discussed in succession below.

RQ 1: How did the English courses administered in the Spring Semester (such as Reading and Discussion I) potentially influence students' self-confidence to speak English in small group settings?

From the data presented in Section 4, it is clear that students greatly improved their speaking self-confidence over the course of the semester. This is not surprising at all considering that this group of students, who chose to enroll in a faculty that specializes in English, had likely never been exposed to so much English instruction in their lives (Margolis, 2020). From a research perspective, since students were taking several English courses, it is impossible to deduce how much of it was due to any one specific course. However, it is an encouraging sign that the topics associated with the Reading and Discussion I course demonstrated the largest gains in the data.

From a practical perspective, it does not matter which course had the most to do with students' self-confidence gains. As we mentioned above, speaking can be a major

hurdle for Japanese EFL university students in their quest to master English (ETS, 2020; Schulman, 2013; Nath, 2022; Nippon.com, 2019). If the KEY program can get students feeling comfortable and help them find their voice in the first semester of a four-semester-long English program, it will go a long way toward students eventually becoming proficient users of English, which is the ultimate goal of the program. Increasing communicative self-confidence is just the first step, however. Ultimately, students will need to be assessed on their performance and what they can actually do in English.

Further, from some of the students' comments, it was evident that they believed the reading exercises helped to provide them with the knowledge necessary to perform more effectively in the subsequent oral tasks. This is in line with Grabe's (1991) assertion that reading helps learners acquire content/world background knowledge, which, ultimately, helps them develop and voice their own opinions. Moreover, a few of the students mentioned their exposure to new vocabulary in the readings. As presented in *Students' Evaluations of the Coursebook* in Section 4, Student A remarked that the new vocabulary they learned in the readings helped increase the vocabulary they could use in discussion activities. This is consistent with Mart's (2012) belief that vocabulary development, which starts with reading, is one of the vital factors that will affect fluency in speaking. As presented in *Students' Evaluations of the Course* in Section 4, Student Q also mentioned the new vocabulary they came across in the readings; however, Student Q mentioned that they found the vocabulary difficult. Nevertheless, since Student Q was exposed to, as well as cognizant of, the new vocabulary, it is likely that learning, to some degree, took place. However, unlike Student A, it does not seem that Student Q was ready, or confident enough, to use the new vocabulary in subsequent oral tasks.

RQ 2: How did the students feel about the Reading and Discussion I course?

As the results presented in Section 4 demonstrate, the students were generally satisfied with all facets of the Reading and Discussion I course. Undoubtedly, this is a positive finding; however, based on the authors' experiences, it is not all that surprising in the sense that, when all things are equal, first-year Japanese university students tend to rate most of their teachers and classes highly. This is especially true when you factor in that the students who participated in this study generally had positive feelings about English from the beginning. As the goal of this action research was to provide course planners with assessment information that can help them develop practices to improve their ability

to teach a reading and discussion course to a specific group of students, there was no impetus to compare satisfaction levels across faculties or other groups of students. However, from a research perspective, it would be useful for further inquiries to include a control group to help determine the true effects of treatment.

Furthermore, from a practical standpoint, the two categories that are worthy of further consideration are *clear* and *difficult*. In other words, how can instructors make their classes more clear and less difficult? Certainly, teachers will have their own methods for achieving this, and there is not one single way that is right for everyone. In general, as Minero (2016) advises, it makes great sense to regularly check in (and keep up) with students' perceptions. This can include administering brief questionnaires at the end of each lesson asking for students' input about what they learned and how they thought the class went. Accordingly, teachers need to be willing to adjust and adapt their teaching methods to address students' comments and concerns. In addition, to establish more clarity and help students understand key concepts covered in class, it would be useful for instructors to lay out the specific goals of each unit in the coursebook from the start. Subsequently, providing students with a review sheet at the end of each class and/or for homework would help solidify and reinforce the core elements that were covered that day.

RQ 3: How did the students feel about the coursebook *In Focus 2* used in the Reading and Discussion I course?

As reported in Section 4, the students found the *In Focus 2* (Browne, Culligan & Phillips, 2014) coursebook used in the Reading and Discussion I classes to be perfectly adequate. By the same token, however, the fact that satisfaction scores were lower across the board for the coursebook vis-à-vis the course (and there were various negative comments about the coursebook) provides the impetus for further reflection. In addition, some of the comments made by the teachers that were in line with student concerns warrant further exploration. For instance, both a teacher and a student alluded to the fact that the coursebook, which was published in 2014, was a bit outdated and perhaps did not best reflect some of the developments of the last few years. To this end, the authors contacted the publisher and writers to check whether any updated versions of this coursebook were in the works. While the publisher has no current plans to create any new editions, the authors of *In Focus 2* (Browne, et al., 2014) are currently planning to revise and update the *In Focus* content in a form to be confirmed.



Thus, if a new and updated version of *In Focus 2* were to become available, the authors of this paper would certainly move forward with it as their primary textbook choice. However, in this state of flux, it may be wise for teachers to at least start to explore other coursebooks for the Reading and Discussion I course. Ideally, such materials should be recently published and reflect current global issues. In addition, with a focus on developing reading and discussion skills, the coursebook should motivate students and help them develop their critical thinking skills. To this end, it also makes sense to employ materials that can be utilized within a flipped approach the same way *In Focus 2* was. That is, teachers would be wise to prioritize active learning and discussion during class time by assigning students readings and other non-communicative exercises (which help them prepare for subsequent class discussions) to be viewed (or completed) mostly at home or outside of class. Finally, as we have alluded to above, instructors will have to make concerted efforts to present the contents of the coursebook to students in a way that is clear and at a suitable level for students. As one student suggested, it would be helpful for teachers to offer additional explanations (and annotations) pertaining to language features that students might find especially challenging.

## 6. Conclusion

This current study aimed to contribute to our understanding of ELT in the Japanese EFL university context. Specifically, this study was able to shed light on the effects of instruction on Japanese university learners' self-confidence to speak in English. Over the course of one semester, students greatly increased their self-confidence in providing their opinions on a wide array of topics in English. Communicative self-confidence can, eventually, help lead to improved oral competence, as several researchers have suggested that exposure to English-speaking settings and frequent L2 speaking practice improves EFL learners' speaking abilities (Chou, 2018; Cutrone & Beh, 2018; Yanagi & Baker, 2016). Ideally, future studies would examine whether gains in communicative self-confidence were, in fact, borne out in students' language proficiency and oral output.

Furthermore, this study sought to provide teachers with assessment information that can help them develop practices to improve their ability to teach a specific reading and discussion course moving forward. In particular, the findings were informative in terms of helping instructors learn where to focus their attention in the future. Specifically, in utilizing more up-to-date materials for future cohorts of this class, the instructors will make

concerted efforts to choose materials that best adhere to the specific needs and proficiency levels of the students in this context. To this end, Richards (2002, 2017) and Nunan (1988), two recognized authorities on English-language acquisition, teacher training, and material design, have long advocated the implementation of needs analyses as the starting point of the design of a syllabus or a curriculum. Needs analyses help course planners with the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities. By soliciting information from students (i.e., to determine their goals and preferred learning styles), students can become active participants in their own learning, thereby, potentially increasing motivation.

While the findings of this study pertaining to student satisfaction were useful to inform our specific context, the greater implication is confirmation of how useful student assessments of their courses can be in informing language programs. According to Wu, Zhang, and Liu (2021), student assessments of courses, if done well, can fully engage students in the learning and assessment process; however, such assessments can be difficult to implement and are not always adequately utilized. To administer assessments of courses more effectively, Wu et al. (2021) stress that course planners need to equip teachers with necessary assessment-related knowledge and skills, encourage instructors to negotiate learning goals with students, and help teachers establish a trusting environment in their classrooms. Thus, one of the themes we keep coming back to is the importance of soliciting students' opinions to inform decision-making for all aspects of curriculum and course planning. To dig deeper into students' perceptions of satisfaction, future studies would do well to include follow-up interviews.

Moreover, it would also be interesting to examine students' communicative self-confidence, as well as actual learning outcomes, over a longer period of time. Further, while 89-94 students participated in various aspects of this study, the participants of this study were limited to first-year students in the School of Global Humanities and Social Sciences. Subsequent research examining a more diverse group of students across different faculties would be welcome. It would also be useful for researchers to examine whether self-confidence, as well as student evaluations of their classes, are correlated to their English proficiency levels. Due to the limitations of this study, it is not possible to generalize this study's findings to the wider population of Japanese EFL speakers. Further, due to factors beyond the researchers' control, it was not possible to include a control group. Undoubtedly, the inclusion of a control group may help enhance the effect of the course under discussion. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the importance of the findings of this

exploratory study, as they do provide a platform for future investigation and diagnosis into this area. In addition, more specifically, the findings have yielded valuable insights to aid a group of action researchers endeavoring to assess and improve upon their ability to teach a specific course moving forward.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix 1*

The following link provides access to the online questionnaire used to assess students' confidence levels in this study:

<https://forms.gle/WJpQCPqpu8GVeZ6T7>

### *Appendix 2*

The following link provides access to the online questionnaire used to assess students' satisfaction with their Reading and Discussion I Course:

<https://forms.gle/uJsDxy73aPsEcd3f8>

### *Appendix 3*

The following link provides access to the online questionnaire used to assess students' satisfaction with the *In Focus 2* coursebook used in the Reading and Discussion I Course:

<https://forms.gle/1yaKFHC44crBFWRs6>