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Article

The Effects of Task-Based Instruction on Japanese EFL Learners' Communicative Confidence and Willingness to Communicate

Pino Cutrone*
Nagasaki University, Japan

Siewkee Beh
Osaka Ohtani University, Japan

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Abstract

While extensive research supports the benefits of task-based language teaching (TBLT), its real-world impact on EFL classrooms remains unclear. This study aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice by investigating how TBLT affects practical classroom settings. Specifically, in addressing an area where Japanese EFL (JEFL) learners have traditionally struggled, this study investigates the effectiveness of task-based instruction on JEFL university students' communicative confidence and willingness to communicate (WTC) in L2 English. To this end, a group of 32 JEFL university students (enrolled in an English Listening and Speaking course) participated in this study. Assessments of each participant's communicative confidence and WTC in L2 English were conducted at the beginning and the end of the course (after 15 weeks, which consisted of approximately 45 hours of TBLT). Each of these assessments involved completing two questionnaires and subsequently being interviewed regarding their feelings concerning the instruction they received. The instruction provided between the Pre-test and Post-test followed the principles of TBLT. Specifically, over the course of fifteen weeks in this English Communication course, the instructor covered one of the fifteen units of a task-based coursebook/syllabus each week. Each unit in the syllabus involved the students engaging in a series of tasks, which included a Pre-Task, Core Task, First Listening (for gist), Second Listening (for analysis), Language Analysis Exercises, and Post-Task. The results, overall, showed that TBLT had an overwhelmingly positive impact on students' communicative confidence and WTC in L2 English.

Keywords

Japanese university EFL students, task-based language teaching (TBLT), communicative confidence, willingness to communicate (WTC)

*Corresponding author. Email: k-pino@nagasaki-u.ac.jp

1. Introduction

There is ample evidence to suggest that speaking is the skill that Japanese EFL learners (JEFLs) have the greatest trouble with (Taylor, 2020; Ellis, 1991). This often stems from and results in JEFLs' reluctance to speak English (Anderson, 1993, 2019; Christopher, 2020; Greer, 2000). This hesitancy to speak not only hinders JEFLs' oral English development but also creates cross-cultural misunderstandings (Cutrone, 2005, 2014; Sato, 2008). Many see this as a failing of the English education system in Japan. Research by Ellis (1991), Okushi (1990), and Roger (2008) shows a significant lack of spoken English fluency among high school graduates, while Cutrone and Beh (2023) and Farooq (2005) suggest that university students in this context also often struggle with basic communication in English. Accordingly, Helgesen's (1993) experience in the JEFL university context reflects a lack of motivation and willingness to communicate among the JEFLs in his oral English classes, as he describes how his students rarely initiated conversations or challenged ideas, hindering interactive learning.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has attempted to address this issue for over 30 years, promoting a more communicative approach to language learning (Nowlan & Samuell, 2019; Watanuki & Tsuji, 2007). This has led to a focus on materials and activities that encourage spoken interaction and intercultural understanding. Research efforts have also shifted towards understanding the emotional and psychological factors impacting communication, such as willingness to communicate (WTC), motivation, self-confidence, and cultural attitudes (Hashimoto, 2002; Matsuoka, 2005; Matsuoka & Evans, 2005; Yashima, 2002; Yashima, Zenuck-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004). However, implementing these changes has been extremely slow and continues to face some major obstacles, one of which is the current entrance exam system (Caine, 2005; Reesor, 2002; Sakui, 2004). These exams often emphasize rote memorization, grammar translation, and passive knowledge, qualities irrelevant to real-world communication. Consequently, teaching methods prioritize exam preparation over spoken English practice, offering limited opportunities for language use.

To truly improve JEFLs' oral proficiency and communication skills, Japan needs a two-pronged approach. Firstly, administrators need to develop new assessments that focus on spoken English usage. Secondly, as the writers advocate, curriculum planners, material developers, and instructors would do well to adopt innovative teaching methods like Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) to create more opportunities for students to practice speaking and using English communicatively. To this end, the authors believe that developing communicative self-confidence and willingness to communicate (WTC) in L2 English are necessary building blocks toward effective speaking. Thus, this study has been designed to examine the effects of TBLT on JEFL university students' communicative confidence and WTC in L2 English.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

TBLT centers on tasks as the cornerstone of language acquisition. Each lesson revolves around a specific task, prioritizing communication as a process of meaning-making (Nunan, 1988) rather than the mere accumulation of linguistic knowledge. Ellis (2009, p. 223) outlines four key characteristics of an effective task:

1. The primary focus should be on 'meaning' (by which is meant that learners should be mainly concerned with processing the semantic and pragmatic meaning of utterances).
2. There should be some kind of 'gap' (i.e. a need to convey information, to express an opinion or to infer meaning).
3. Learners should largely have to rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) in order to complete the activity.

4. There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language (i.e. the language serves as the means for achieving the outcome, not as an end in its own right).

By incorporating real-world activities (Ellis, 2009; Skehan, 1998), TBLT tasks enhance the relevance and applicability of language learning.

As described by Prabhu (1987), the three primary task categories that are commonly employed consist of the following: information gap, reasoning gap, and opinion gap. First, in information-gap tasks, learners bridge an information gap by exchanging knowledge to complete a task, such as collaboratively completing a picture or map with missing elements held by different learners. Second, in reasoning-gap tasks, learners derive new information through inference and deduction from existing information, such as planning a budget within specific constraints. Third, in opinion-gap tasks, learners share personal preferences, feelings, or attitudes, such as engaging in a discussion about a current social issue they are familiar with.

2.2 Time for a change: Why is TBLT a viable alternative in the JEFL context?

The principal reasons justifying a TBLT are threefold: (1) there exists a large body of empirical evidence advocating it over other instructional approaches (Crookes, 1986; Ellis, 2003, 2009; Long, 1985; Long & Crookes, 1992; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1998, 2000), (2) the current methods in Japan for teaching English communication skills do not seem to be working, and (3) TBLT is especially motivating and effective for students. Regarding the first and second points, research consistently highlights the importance of meaningful contexts for language acquisition (Cutrone, 2013; Halliday, 1975). Unfortunately, as we have discussed above, many Japanese EFL classrooms still rely heavily on rote learning, grammar drills, and translation, creating a teacher-centered, non-communicative environment focused on reading and exam preparation (The Japan Times, 2015). This approach has been linked to a decline in student motivation (Moritoshi, 2009).

TBLT, thus, addresses these shortcomings through its core principles. Firstly, task-based instruction (TBI) prioritizes authenticity. Unlike contrived dialogues found in many ELT materials, the tasks within a task-based approach (TBA) incorporate realia and authentic language. In other words, students can encounter real places, people, and problems, using language that would be used in those situations. Further, TBI emphasizes practical application over rote memorization often found in traditional methods. Tasks are designed to be relevant to students' lives. Students see the value in their learning because the tasks mirror real-life situations they may encounter.

For instance, a task where students advise an exchange student studying in Japan seems far more practical than unrealistic role-playing scenarios that force students to imagine such things as being a shop clerk in a foreign country. This approach prepares students for the unpredictable and spontaneous exchanges they will encounter in real-life scenarios. Finally, TBLT intrinsically motivates learners in that each task has clear objectives that drive students forward. Problem-solving tasks or planning activities provide a concrete goal for communication, fostering engagement and a desire to succeed.

TBLT, thus, presents a promising approach for EFL instruction, particularly in contexts like Japan where traditional methods may be less effective. By prioritizing communication through engaging and meaningful tasks, TBLT can equip students with the skills necessary to confidently utilize English in real-world situations. However, this is not just about having the linguistic ability to speak; rather, the key question as it relates to ELT in Japan (and the goals of this study) is how effective TBLT is at coaxing students out of their shells. As we have mentioned above, the first step for any instructor in the Japanese EFL context is trying to motivate students to communicate more. With that in mind, the following sub-sections will shed light on the two variables examined in this study: communicative self-confidence and willingness to communicate (WTC) in L2 English.

2.3 Communicative self-confidence in Japanese EFL classes

While speaking skills, ultimately, need to be assessed based on fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, and lexical complexity, communicative self-confidence is a necessary element of effective speaking (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998). This confidence can empower students to overcome anxieties related to social and cultural factors. As Cutrone, Collins, Nishikawa, and Datzman (2023) have outlined, many JEFLs have the linguistic ability to speak English yet they might choose not to for a multitude of reasons. For instance, some students might be reluctant to participate in class discussions for fear of standing out. This may be attributed to Japanese culture, which tends to value shyness over verbosity (Doyon, 2000; McVeigh, 2002; Sato, 2008). Moreover, as Hidasi (2004) points out, there exists a lack of speaking practice in Japanese classrooms. Traditional non-communicative entrance exams and teacher-centered instruction create environments where students rarely experience communicative activities (Allen, 2016).

Research by Tridinanti (2018) supports the link between confidence and speaking achievement. Their study found a significant correlation between self-confidence and speaking ability, but not between anxiety and speaking ability. This suggests that students who speak more due to higher confidence have more opportunities to improve (Chou, 2018; Yanagi & Baker, 2016). As Chou (2021) details, increased speaking practice allows students to enhance various aspects of their speech, such as content, vocabulary usage, and fluency. This ultimately leads to stronger speaking skills and more frequent use of communication strategies.

2.4 Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

The concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) has become a valuable tool in understanding individual differences in second language (L2) communication. Unlike many other models, WTC considers a range of influences, including motivation, personality, anxiety, experience, and self-confidence (Clément, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Yashima et al., 2004). Since WTC directly relates to how often someone communicates, it significantly impacts how well they learn a language (SLA) and warrants more emphasis on teaching methods and L2 pedagogy.

Originally, WTC began as a measure to describe one's general tendency to initiate communication in their L1 (first language) when given the chance (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987, 1990). However, as MacIntyre et al. (1998) contend, WTC in one's native language does not necessarily carry over to WTC in foreign languages. Accordingly, MacIntyre et al (1998) defined L2 WTC more specifically as the desire to engage in communication using the L2. While WTC in a first language is generally considered a fixed personality trait, WTC in a second language can vary depending on the situation, group dynamics, and the learner's L2 proficiency (Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre et al., 1998).

MacIntyre et al. (1998) built on the work of MacIntyre and Charos (1996) to propose a multi-layered model of WTC. This pyramid model (see Figure 1) suggests that social and individual contexts, emotional and cognitive factors, motivational propensities, situated antecedents, and ultimately, behavioral intention (i.e., WTC), all interrelate to impact communication behavior (i.e., L2 use). The model has received significant research support, having been successfully applied in various second and foreign language learning contexts (Burroughs, Marie, & McCroskey, 2003; Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre et al., 1998; Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004).

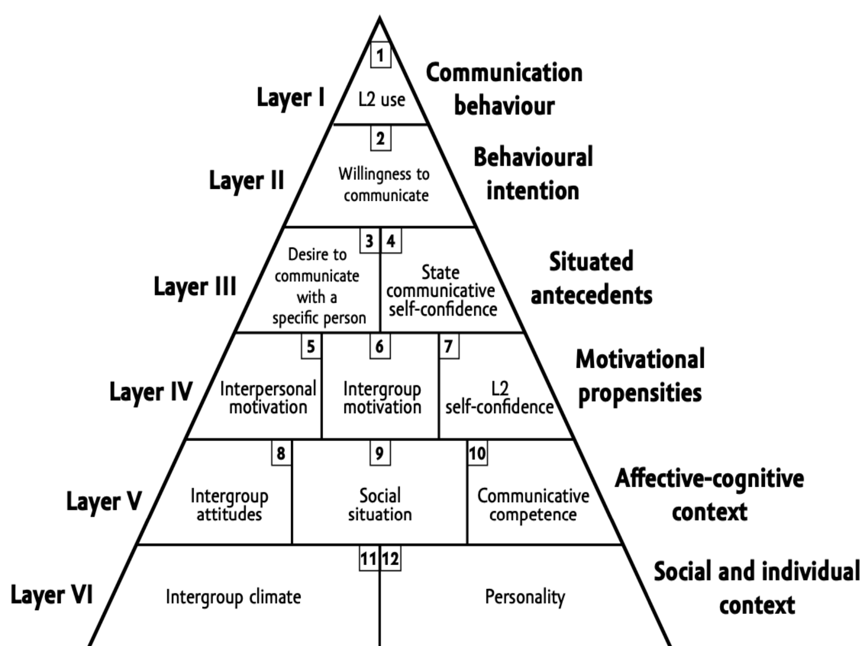
The top three layers (I, II, and III) of the pyramid represent factors specific to each communication situation. Layer I, at the peak of the pyramid, represents the actual communication behavior, resulting from the complex interplay of variables in the lower layers. Layer II focuses on the willingness to communicate itself, defined as the readiness to talk with a particular person or group at a specific time, using the L2. Layer III, situated antecedents, consists of two factors directly influencing WTC: the desire to communicate with a specific person and the learner's self-confidence in using the language. This model builds on Clément's (1980, 1986) social context model, where self-confidence is seen as a

combination of low anxiety and perceived competence in communication. The desire to communicate is thought to be driven by a mix of motivations related to building relationships (i.e., integrativeness) and achieving goals (i.e., instrumentality).

The bottom three layers (IV, V, and VI) of the WTC pyramid represent more stable and enduring influences, considered independent variables in analyzing L2 WTC. Layer IV, motivational propensities, consists of three sub-constructs: interpersonal motivation, intergroup motivation, and self-confidence. Interpersonal motivation is driven by either the desire for connection or the need for control. Affiliation is influenced by factors like attractiveness, proximity, shared interests, and repeated exposure. Control motivation relates to limiting the other communicator's freedom in the interaction. Intergroup motivation stems from the learner's group identity and, like interpersonal motivation, is based on affiliation (building rapport) and control (maintaining group power dynamics). Finally, self-confidence in this layer is made up of two components: how the learner perceives their L2 skills and their level of anxiety related to using the language. These two factors tend to have a strong negative correlation, meaning higher self-perceived competence is linked to lower anxiety.

Figure 1

Heuristic Model of Variables Influencing WTC (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998, p. 547)



3. Research Questions

The aims of this study are twofold: to help fill in the gap that exists between research and practice concerning TBLT and to address various issues in the Japanese EFL context. First, despite a great deal of theoretical and psycholinguistic research support, not much is known about how TBLT affects the language classroom in practical terms (Ellis, 2021). Second, as discussed above, traditional instructional methods in Japan have, by and large, failed to consistently produce competent English speakers. Thus, it is time to explore new methods of instruction to yield potentially better results. One of the main challenges instructors face in their English communication classes in Japan is trying to coax students out of their shells and get them to communicate more. The writers hypothesize that TBLT can facilitate the development of learners' confidence and WTC in speaking English. To this end, the following research questions (RQs) have been formulated:

RQ 1: How will TBLT influence Japanese EFL university students' confidence in speaking in L2 English in this study?

RQ 2: How will TBLT influence Japanese EFL university students' willingness to communicate in L2 English in this study?

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

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

This study involved 32 Japanese participants (23 females and 9 males), who resided in Nagasaki Prefecture and were first-year students in the School of Global Humanities and Social Sciences at Nagasaki University at the time of this study. Participants comprised the students enrolled in an EFL course called Listening and Speaking I (from April 2023 until August 2023). With informed consent, students readily available to the researchers were recruited for this study. Participation was voluntary, and students could choose to skip sections or withdraw entirely at any point. To ensure anonymity, participants are referred to by pseudonyms, and their privacy will be strictly protected.

Participants were between 18 and 20 years old and had studied English for eight years on average (including a collective six years in junior and senior high school). In approximate terms, students' oral proficiency levels ranged from A2-B1 (on the CEFR scale); however, instructor descriptions of the participants' overall English abilities align with the frequently cited concept of the *false beginner* in the Japanese EFL context (Helgesen, Brown, & Mandeville, 2007; Martin, 2003). As Peaty (1987, p. 4) characterizes Japanese university students as "prototype false beginners", these learners possess a foundation in English grammar and translation acquired during their secondary education yet demonstrate limited communicative skills.

4.2 Procedures and data collection methods

This action research study involved the steps described in Table 1.

Table 1

The Four Procedural Steps Involved in this Study

Step 1	Pre-tests (consisting of questionnaires) conducted within one week of Step 2 beginning
Step 2	Treatment: 15 weeks (i.e., approximately 45 hours) of TBLT
Step 3	Post-test (consisting of questionnaires and interviews) conducted within one week of Step 2 ending
Step 4	Data analysis

The four procedural steps involved in this study are described in greater detail.

Step 1 (Pre-test). The Pre-test, which was conducted within one week of the course starting, consisted of having participants complete two online questionnaires: a questionnaire to measure students' self-confidence in speaking English and another questionnaire to measure WTC in L2 English. The communicative confidence questionnaire contained 21 items (see Appendix 1). 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) concerning the degree of confidence students had in performing each of the 18 speaking tasks.

These 18 items were directly related to tasks presented in the TBLT course, such as introducing oneself to foreign guests, advising foreign visitors preparing for their trip to Japan, helping foreign visitors choose between a homestay and a student dormitory, giving foreign visitors directions on a map, ranking (and comparing) sightseeing places in Nagasaki, rating (and comparing) tourist destinations in other places in Kyushu, presenting on one's hometown, arranging a day out with foreign friends, explaining and recommending Japanese foods to foreign guests, helping foreign visitors choose which hotel to stay in, providing the details of Kyushu-based festivals to foreign guests, ranking the leisure activities of Japanese university students, suggesting Japanese souvenirs to foreign guests when they return home, advising foreigners wanting to study Japanese, and saying goodbye and setting goals for the future.

To measure WTC in this study, the researchers adopted McCroskey's (1992) widely used 20-item, probability-estimate scale. The WTC questionnaire in this study contained 23 items (see Appendix 2). The first three items of this questionnaire sought to collect labeling information of participants, while the remaining 20 items were designed to collect data on participants' willingness to communicate in various situations in L2 English. Twelve of the items are scored as part of the scale, while eight of the items are fillers. While this scale yields an overall WTC score, it also produces sub-scores based on the contextual dimensions of conversations. This includes three sub-scores that take into account the type of interlocutor (i.e., strangers, acquaintances, friends) and four sub-scores based on the type of communication context (i.e., public speaking, large meetings, small groups, and interpersonal communication).

Step 2 (Treatment): Within one week of completing the questionnaires in the Pre-test, the participants of this study began to receive task-based instruction (TBI). This constituted 90-minute lessons twice a week over a 15-week semester, which consisted of a total of 45 hours of TBI. Following the tenets of TBLT discussed above, the researchers designed and administered a syllabus to suit the specific needs of students in their context. For instance, students in this context are predominantly from the Kyushu region of Japan and, thus, the tasks within the lessons have incorporated realia that will be familiar to students from this geographical area. To further motivate students, the tasks in this task-based syllabus (TBS) have been designed to have clear (and manageable) objectives, which are both realistic in terms of what students in this context might actually do and relevant to them. The themes and tasks implemented in this course mirror the activities outlined above in describing the communicative conference questionnaire (see Appendix 1).

Moreover, within the framework of this TBS, each unit was structured according to the seven-step approach put forward by Willis (1998), as follows. The **Pre-Task** at the start of each unit is designed to introduce and generate interest in the unit's themes and topics. Further, this step can also be used to pre-teach any vocabulary that the instructor believes the students might have trouble with.

The **Core Task** is the central part of each unit from which all other aspects derive. As described above, this task enables students to engage in meaningful communication to complete the task. Students are required to focus on achieving the task objective and, thus, fluency (over accuracy) at this stage. Within the information, reasoning, and opinion gap framework, tasks involve students taking part in matching, speculation, rating, ranking, decision-making, and problem-solving activities.

Once students have completed the task, the next step is for them to **Prepare** and subsequently provide a brief oral **Report** of what their group came up with in the core task. For instance, if the core task required students to choose the best accommodation for them when traveling, students would now be able to share (and explain) their choices with the rest of the class. Since this type of communication involves a brief speech, which is public, rehearsed, and final, students are required to focus more on

accuracy than fluency. Thus, the core task facilitates interaction in a private and informal register and focuses on fluency, whereas the oral report, conversely, requires students to produce speech in a more public and formal register and focuses on accuracy.

To provide students with a realistic model of English use in a familiar context (established through prior unit activities), the instructor incorporates a series of **Listening Activities**. This activity features recordings of proficient speakers engaged in a task similar to the core task the students just completed (Willis, 1998). TBLT emphasizes the use of authentic language, and these recordings reflect that focus, being unscripted and natural (Breen, 1987). The listening phase itself is divided into two stages. Initially, students listen for general comprehension of the conversation(s) in the unit. Subsequently, with guidance from the instructor and/or listening tasks, students' attention shifts to specific linguistic features, that are new to them and/or considered crucial for completing the task (Long & Crookes, 1992). After the second listening activity, **Language Analysis Activities** are utilized to draw students' attention to specific linguistic features. These features are either those that recur frequently within the conversations or those considered essential for successful task completion (Long & Crookes, 1992). This phase of a task-based lesson incorporates grammatical exercises and explanations to solidify understanding of these key linguistic elements (Willis, 1998).

In the **Post-Task**, which is the final phase of each unit, students are afforded another opportunity to take part in a task that closely replicates the core task of the unit. From the steps the students have taken in the unit, students should be better equipped to handle the demands of the task.

Step 3: The Post-test, which was conducted within one week of the course ending, consisted of having participants complete the same two online questionnaires described in Step 1. Additionally, each participant was interviewed separately for approximately ten minutes in the primary researcher's office. The purpose of these interviews was to follow up on the questionnaires and to gain a more in-depth understanding of how TBLT affected students' communicative confidence and willingness to communicate in L2 English.

Interviews were conducted primarily in English; however, participants were reassured they were free to use Japanese if they needed to (although none did). The interviews were semi-structured (and informal) in that the interviewer had a general plan for the interviews (including asking such questions as "How did you find TLBT?" and "How was it different from other types of EFL instruction you had previously experienced?") but did not stop the interviewee from talking about things beyond the questions posed. At various times, the interviewer flexibly incorporated follow-up questions to delve deeper into novel topics and themes raised by participants.

Step 4: The final step of this study is to analyze and interpret data produced by the questionnaires and interviews. Data produced in this study were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative data were analyzed with JASP (2024). Both inferential and descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data of this study. Addressing Research Question 1 specifically, the Shapiro-Wilk test revealed that some data distributions deviated from normality. To account for this, non-parametric inferential tests were employed alongside medians and interquartile ranges (IQRs) for effective data description and significance assessment. Hence, a series of Wilcoxon Signed-Rank tests were conducted to pinpoint changes in speaking self-confidence between the Pre-test and Post-test. An index of r was computed to assess the effect size for the analyses. Following the benchmarks set by Plonsky and Oswald (2014), r values of .25, .40, and .60 were interpreted as indicative of small, medium, and large effects, respectively. Throughout the analysis, a significance level of .05 was adopted.

Research Question 2 corresponds to the data collected from the WTC questionnaires. Since this data met the assumptions for parametric tests, Paired Sample T-Tests were used to determine whether the differences between the means of the two groups were significant. Cohen's d was used to calculate the effect size to detail the magnitude of change. Cohen (1988) classified effect sizes as small ($d = 0.2$), medium ($d = 0.5$), and large ($d \geq 0.8$). The level of significance was set at .05. Lastly, to inform both research questions in greater depth, the researchers examined the qualitative data produced by

the post-treatment interviews in this study. The researchers recorded all responses and then analyzed, categorized, and ultimately presented them according to themes relevant to the study.

5. Results

5.1 Differences in communicative confidence from Pre-test to Post-test

Table 2 reports the following statistics: the pre- and post-treatment medians (Md) and IQR of the respondents' communicative confidence scores on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not confident at all) to 7 (extremely confident). Further, Table 2 includes W (the Wilcoxon test statistic), z (the critical z-value for 95 % 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.

Thus, as shown in Table 2, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank tests demonstrated that participants were significantly more confident performing oral tasks in the Post-test, as compared to the Pre-test ($p < .01$ for all 18 items). Sixteen of the eighteen items were significant at the $p < .001$ level; the two that were slightly less significant were Item C (i.e., Talking with foreigners) and Item K (i.e., Making plans), which had p scores of .004 and .003 respectively. Moreover, as shown in Table 2, the effect sizes were large ($r > -.60$) for all 18 items. Lastly, the IQR scores for the 18 items ranged between 1 and 2.25, which indicate moderate to low IQRs. Therefore, the middle values tended to cluster at the median, with minimal variation.

Table 2

Confidence Scores Before and After TBLT Using Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Tests

N = 32 Category	Pre-test Md (IQR)	Post-test Md (IQR)	W	z	p	r
A. Small Intro	5 (2)	5.5 (1)	14	-3.528	<.001	-.879
B. Large Intro	3.5 (1)	5 (1.25)	21	-3.807	<.001	-.871
C. Talk with Foreigners	4 (2)	5 (2.25)	34.5	-2.815	.004	-.701
D. Japanese Culture	4 (1)	5 (2)	25	-3.928	<.001	-.865
E. Seek advice	3.5 (2)	5 (1)	49	-3.213	<.001	-.721
F. Give Advice	3 (2)	4 (2)	32.5	-3.498	<.001	-.8
G. Compare	3 (2)	4 (2)	52.5	-3.427	<.001	-.741
H. Living Arrangements	3 (1)	5 (1.25)	52.5	-3.427	<.001	-.741
I. Sightseeing	4 (2)	6 (1)	13	-4.127	<.001	-.926
J. Directions	3 (2)	5 (2)	53.5	-3.812	<.001	-.784
K. Make Plans	4 (2)	5 (1.25)	48	-2.914	.003	-.680
L. Schedule	3.5 (1)	5 (2)	21	-4.036	<.001	-.889
M. Foods	4 (2)	5 (1.25)	48	-3.53	<.001	-.764
N. Souvenirs	4 (2)	5 (2)	28	-3.868	<.001	-.852
O. Hotel	3.5 (2)	4 (1.25)	19.5	-3.604	<.001	-.859
P. Festivals	4 (2)	5 (2)	18	-3.650	<.001	-.870
Q. Hobbies / P.T. Jobs	3 (1)	5 (2)	38	-3.881	<.001	-.825
R. English	4 (2)	5 (2)	28	-3.746	<.001	-.840

5.2 Differences in WTC scores from the Pre-test to the Post-test

Table 3 reports the following statistics: the pre- and post-treatment means and standard deviations (SDs) of the respondents' WTC scores. In addition, Table 3 includes the mean difference, mean percentage difference (the difference between the new value and the old value, divided by the old value), t (a statistic indicating how much the mean difference deviates from zero), p (represents the tail probability of the observed t-statistic under the assumption of the null hypothesis), and d (showing effect sizes using Cohen's d) scores.

As presented in Table 3, Paired Samples T-Tests indicated that students were significantly more willing to communicate in L2 English in the Post-test, as compared to the Pre-test ($p <.01$ for all 8 WTC categories). Notably, both the Meetings and Public Speaking sub-categories within the WTC measure demonstrated highly significant effects ($p < .001$). Rounding off to the nearest tenth of a decimal point, effect sizes for seven of the eight WTC categories were medium ($d = \geq .5$ to .6). Meetings was the lone sub-category to demonstrate a large effect size ($d = .8$). Therefore, all data groups showed clear effects, as medium effect sizes ($d = 0.5$) suggest a noticeable and potentially meaningful impact, while large effect sizes ($d \geq 0.8$) indicate strong and likely impactful changes. Lastly, the standard deviations were generally high across the WTC sub-categories shown in Table 3, indicating a considerable variation in the WTC scores.

Table 3

WTC Scores Before and After TBLT Using Paired Samples T-Tests

N = 32 Category	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Mean Diff.	(%)	t	p	d
Overall WTC	49.21 (20.79)	63.23 (16.06)	14.2	28.49	-3.104	.004	-.549
Group Discussion	54.85 (23.63)	68.33 (18.37)	13.48	24.58	-2.694	.01	-.576
Meetings	40.04 (21.89)	57.99 (18.15)	17.95	44.83	-4.219	<.001	-.746
Interpersonal Conversations	49.43 (24.78)	65.01 (17.44)	15.58	31.52	-3.313	.002	-.586
Public Speaking	49.2 (22.22)	67.34 (17.02)	18.14	36.87	-3.555	<.001	-.628
Stranger	40.66 (25)	54.05 (20.1)	13.39	32.93	-2.539	.01	-.449
Acquaintance	49.06 (22.52)	62.48 (18.14)	13.42	27.35	-2.8	.009	-.495
Friend	57.93 (21.53)	73.18 (20.6)	13.42	26.33	-2.809	.009	-.497

5.3 Post-treatment interviews

Through interviews, the researchers attempted to delve deeper into how students perceived their experience with TBLT. Upon analyzing this data, the researchers identified three central themes that resonated with the study's goals: overall impression of TBLT, how participants thought TBLT was different from other instructional methods they had experienced, and potential disadvantages of TBI. First, concerning students' impressions of TBLT, responses were generally quite positive across the board. When the interviewer asked the students to explain why they liked TBLT, twenty-nine of the thirty-two students mentioned that it was fun and/or they liked having the chance to speak, as shown in the following examples:

Keiko: I liked this class because it gave us a lot of opportunities to speak. It was so fun to talk to my friends a lot in English.

Hideaki: I think I could improve my English because I could have a chance to speak a lot.

Mariko: This class was so fun because I could communicate with many people.

Nineteen of the thirty-two students remarked how useful and practical the tasks were and/or how authentic the language listening models were, as demonstrated in the following responses:

Yuki: I liked the way the activities in the book were real things for me. I am sure I can use this English in my life.

Makoto: The listening models were so good for me because they felt more natural than in other English courses I took, and I can imagine myself using such English in the future.

Kana: I have already used the English from this course in my real life with my international friends because situations were similar. Most other courses I have had did not have such useful English.

In explaining why they liked TBLT, some students such as Makoto and Kana above chose to compare it to previous instructional experiences on their own. When other students were asked how TBLT compared to other instructional approaches they had been exposed to, most of them (26) echoed similar sentiments to the effect that they were dissatisfied in some ways with various aspects of the English instructional methods they had received in the past. The following responses exemplify this:

Yoko: I do not really get a chance to speak in most of my English classes. It's not so fun to just sit and listen. This class was different because it was active learning.

Taro: In most of my classes, especially in high school, we only focussed on grammar and translation. So, when it comes time to use English in conversation, I am so lost. We need real English like we got in this class.

Akiko: Some books we use have activities that do not fit Japanese well. I sometimes have to imagine things impossible for me, but in this class, we could talk about things we know and use English like in real life.

Lastly, when the interviewer asked students about the potential drawbacks of TBLT, most students (29) said there were none. However, three students responded as follows:

Ayako: I guess some Japanese are too shy in a class that requires so much speaking.

Hiroyuki: Speaking is very difficult for Japanese, so maybe this course is too hard for some shy students.

Tomomi: Sometimes when the teacher is not looking the students speak Japanese.

Thus, while TBLT has, by and large, been effective in helping these students find their English voice, it cannot be taken for granted that all students will automatically follow suit. Like with any instructional method employed, cajoling students out of their shells will always be among a teacher's greatest challenges in English communication classes in Japan.

6. Summary and Implications

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

RQ 1: How did TBLT influence Japanese EFL university students' confidence in speaking in L2 English in this study?

As the data presented in Section 5 suggests, TBLT seems to have had a positive impact on the JEFL participants' communicative confidence throughout this study. This bodes well for such students' efforts to improve their EFL speaking skills. As various researchers have explained, the more communicative confidence students have, the more they will speak; and the more they speak, the more likely they are to improve their communication skills (Chou, 2018, 2021; Tridinanti, 2018, Yanagi & Baker, 2016).

With this in mind, however, as evidenced by some of the student interview responses, instructors will always have to pay attention to and make provisions for particularly shy students in this context. Various researchers have studied the relationship between self-confidence and language anxiety. Tridinanti (2018) found a significant correlation between self-confidence and speaking ability but not between anxiety and speaking ability. However, Ariyani and Yosintha (2018) and Hashimoto (2002) speculate that language anxiety may indeed have a direct and debilitating effect on self-confidence.

Regardless, in practical terms, it makes great sense for instructors to aid JEFL students exhibiting severe forms of communication apprehension. As Anderson (1993, 2019) suggests, fostering a comfortable and supportive classroom environment can encourage Japanese EFL students to communicate more readily. This includes reducing foreign language anxiety and building their confidence in speaking English. Cutrone (2009) previously explored methods to address foreign language anxiety, suggesting a shift towards less formal and less evaluative classrooms. Additionally, foreign EFL teachers can benefit from a deeper understanding of Japanese culture to better navigate these influences.

RQ 2: How did TBLT influence Japanese EFL university students' willingness to communicate in L2 English in this study?

Similar to the findings concerning communicative confidence, TBLT had a positive effect on the JEFL participants' willingness to communicate in L2 English. This is a promising development for such students who are trying to improve their EFL speaking skills. As discussed above, research suggests a strong correlation between WTC and speaking proficiency. Students who are more willing to communicate are more likely to actively participate in class discussions and seek opportunities to use English outside of class. This increased practice leads to improvement in speaking proficiency (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

Further, as we have alluded to above, students with higher WTC tend to have greater confidence in using English, while students with lower WTC might experience anxiety about speaking in English, leading them to avoid communication and hindering progress. Given the well-established link between WTC and speaking proficiency (Clément, Dörnyei, & Tremblay, 2012), some scholars have argued that fostering WTC should be a central objective in language learning programs (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). MacIntyre et al (1998) go so far as to state that language programs that do not instill WTC are failed programs.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study have demonstrated some of the benefits of TBLT concerning JEFL university students' communicative confidence and willingness to communicate (WTC) in L2 English. By contributing practical evidence to the body of psycholinguistic research supporting task-based instruction, this study sheds light on the real-world benefits of TBLT for EFL learners in Japan. Accordingly, the authors advocate for language instructors in Japan to explore TBLT in their English communication classes. Although this shift could significantly enhance student learning, it may not be as straightforward to get started as one might assume. Successful implementation requires collaboration with material designers and curriculum developers; however, there presently exist very few TBLT textbooks on the EFL market. As Ellis (2021) points out, publishers are more concerned with producing textbooks that teachers are familiar with and know will sell well than being innovative and/or ensuring

there is a solid research base for the books they publish. Moreover, as Ellis (2014) contends, there seems to be a lack of understanding as to what TBLT is and many misconceptions continue to exist. Thus, the first step may be for instructors to simply make efforts to learn about TBLT and subsequently try to incorporate elements of it in their classes.

It is the writers' modest hope that papers such as this one will help move TBLT more into the mainstream. To this end, we realize that a great more work is required. While increasing communicative confidence and willingness to communicate are crucial building blocks; ultimately, it will be necessary to show that TBLT can improve JEFL learners' speaking performances in terms of fluency, accuracy, syntactic and lexical complexity, etc. To this end, future studies would also do well to build on the limitations of this study. For instance, since the sample size of this study was small and the participants of this study were limited to a small group of first-year students in one faculty at one university, larger-scale studies examining a more diverse group of students across different faculties and settings would be welcome in the future. Moreover, due to factors beyond the researchers' control, it was not possible to include a control group or a delayed Post-test. The inclusion of a control group and a delayed Post-test in future studies would strengthen the causal inferences drawn from the treatment's effects and assess the long-term sustainability of the findings. Nonetheless, this exploratory study provides valuable insights that help pave the way for further investigation into this area.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Communicative Confidence Questionnaire

Name: __________________ Student No: ___________________ Date: __________

Directions. Write a number next to each statement below to show the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

Not confident at all	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Extremely confident

How confident are you in your ability to do the following things in English?

A. Introduce myself in small group settings _____

B. Introduce myself in larger group settings _____

C. Communicate with foreigners _____

D. Provide information and explanation about Japanese culture _____

E. Seek advice from others _____

F. Give advice to others _____

G. Make comparisons and state preferences _____

H. Talk about accommodation and living arrangements _____

I. Talk about and recommend sightseeing places _____

J. Ask for and give directions _____

K. Make plans _____

L. Arrange a schedule _____

M. Describe common Japanese foods _____

N. Talk about Japanese souvenirs _____
O. Choose a hotel _____
P. Ask for and give information about popular Japanese festivals _____
Q. Talk about leisure activities and part-time jobs. _____
R. Talk about how I can improve my English _____

Appendix 2: WTC Questionnaire

Name: ___________________ Student No: _____________________ Date: __________

DIRECTIONS: Below are twenty situations in which a person might choose to communicate or not to communicate in English. Presume that the person in each situation does not speak Japanese but can speak English. Also, presume you have completely free choice. Indicate the percentage of times you would choose to communicate in each type of situation. Indicate in the space at the left what percent of the time you would choose to communicate.

0 = never, 100 = always

_____ 1. *Talk with a service station attendant.
_____ 2. *Talk with a physician.
_____ 3. Present a talk to a group of strangers.
_____ 4. Talk with an acquaintance while standing in line.
_____ 5. *Talk with a salesperson in a store.
_____ 6. Talk in a large meeting of friends.
_____ 7. *Talk with a police officer.
_____ 8. Talk in a small group of strangers.
_____ 9. Talk with a friend while standing in line.
_____ 10. *Talk with a waiter/waitress in a restaurant.
_____ 11. Talk in a large meeting of acquaintances.
_____ 12. Talk with a stranger while standing in line.
_____ 13 *Talk with a secretary.
_____ 14. Present a talk to a group of friends.
_____ 15. Talk in a small group of acquaintances.
_____ 16. *Talk with a garbage collector.
_____ 17. Talk in a large meeting of strangers.
_____ 18. *Talk with a spouse (or girl/boyfriend).
_____ 19. Talk in a small group of friends.
_____ 20. Present a talk to a group of acquaintances.

*The following information is for your reference and is not included in the students' copy. N.B. JEFLs were provided with Japanese explanations. Further, the asterisk (*) marking the filler items above, as well as the scoring table below, were not included on the questionnaires the JEFLs completed.

SCORING: The WTC permits the computation of one total score and seven sub-scores. The sub-scores relate to willingness to communicate in each of four common communication contexts and with three

types of audiences. To compute your scores, merely add your scores for each item and divide by the number indicated below.

Sub-score Desired	Scoring Formula
Group discussion	Add scores for items 8,15, and 19; then divide by 3.
Meetings	Add scores for items 6, 11, and 17; then divide by 3.
Interpersonal conversations	Add scores for items 4,9, and 12; then divide by 3.
Public speaking	Add scores for items 3, 14, and 20; then divide by 3.
Stranger	Add scores for items 3, 8, 12, and 17; then divide by 4.
Acquaintance	Add scores for items 4, 11, 15, and 20; then divide by 4.
Friend	Add scores for items 6, 9, 14, and 19; then divide by 4.

To compute total WTC scores, add the sub-scores for stranger, acquaintance, and friend. Then divide by 3.

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Pino Cutrone is an Associate Professor in the School of Global Humanities and Social Sciences at Nagasaki University. His research interests include pragmatics, discourse analysis, intercultural communication, sociolinguistics relating to Japanese EFL learners, educational technology, and study abroad programs. He has published widely in the field of applied linguistics and intercultural pragmatics.

Siewkee Beh is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Osaka Ohtani University. She focuses her research on English educational policies in Asia and is also interested in how a Task-Based Approach can promote language learning in her teaching context. She has published numerous articles in this area.