The Effect of Topic on Japanese L2 Willingness to Communicate

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study is to explore factors that determine how the topic and the method of topic selection affect willingness to communicate (WTC) for Japanese EFL learners during small-group discussion activities. Topic, and the process of topic selection, is an established variable that can affect situational L2 WTC and is one classroom variable that can be better controlled by teachers who want to focus lessons on spoken output. It was determined that the learners' topic preferences significantly affect their L2 WTC. Topic interest, topic knowledge, personal experiences with the topic, and other topic-specific matters clearly affected the three participants' WTC when using English. It was also shown that individual topic preferences can vary among students and that teacher instincts about topic selection can often be wrong. Based on findings from this study, recommendations are provided about how to select topics to help students feel secure and maintain high WTC in L2 group discussions.*

Keywords: Willingness to communicate, L2 WTC, action research, EFL, topic selection

Introduction

My research interest in willingness to communicate (WTC) originated from the difficulties I have often faced when teaching discussion activities in my high school English as a foreign language (EFL) classes in Japan. Most of my 25-year teaching career has been spent at academic high schools where students study English to pass written tests in preparation for university entrance exams. Partially based on this reality, Japanese high school students often lack motivation to speak when they learn English and I do not recall any previous lesson where learners actively participated in English discussions. One of my teacher beliefs is that classroom discussion activities should be utilized more in English classes in Japan, but how to do this remains a challenge for many English teachers at the high school level. One area of study that practicing classroom teachers can draw from to facilitate more effective English language use among our students is WTC. This action research study is undertaken to determine whether L2 WTC could be nurtured in a more effective way in my teaching.

With respect to my research focus, selection of discussion topics is closely related to the

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learners' situational WTC, and that is one classroom variable that can be better controlled by teachers who want to focus lessons on spoken output. Despite a recent increase in published WTC research related to the Japanese EFL context, not many studies have focused specifically on topic selection. Also, very few WTC studies take a practice-oriented action research (AR) approach. This gap in the research influenced me to develop my research question with the aim that my findings could help high school teachers in practical ways to better understand how different Japanese EFL students respond to different classroom discussion topics. This is important because in the latest revision of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) foreign language national curriculum guidelines for high school English (referred to as the Course of Study), the objective of speaking *interaction* was newly added in 2021 to the other four categories: reading, listening, writing, and speaking (*presentation*). Findings from this research can be potentially useful when applied to this new high school curriculum in Japan.

In summary, this action research study was planned to collect and analyze data from three university students with respect to how topic selection impacts WTC during discussion activities. The topics and the method of topic selection were planned to function as pedagogical interventions. The study therefore mainly focuses on how the learners' topic preferences affect their WTC in their discussion activities. The research question was narrowed and decided as follows: *How do the topic and the method of topic selection affect WTC for Japanese EFL learners in group discussions?*

Literature Review

Origins of L2 WTC Research

Although WTC was first conceptualized to measure a person's predisposition to communicate in their native language (L1), it gained traction in the field of second language (L2) studies mainly thanks to the seminal work of MacIntyre et al. (1998) who sought to answer the important question of why some students embrace the chance to communicate in their L2 while others avoid it. In their study, L2 WTC is defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547). Based on the premise that L2 WTC was more complex in nature than L1 WTC, involving different factors caused by the great uncertainty common to L2 use, their aim in introducing WTC into language learning research was to "orient theory and research toward the ultimate goal of language learning: authentic communication between persons of different languages and cultural backgrounds" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 559).

The main contribution of MacIntyre et al. (1998) was to present this *situational* model of L2 WTC, which added much more than the trait-like predispositions that had been identified in L1 WTC. They positioned their study of L2 WTC as an extension of L1 WTC research which had focused only on personality traits such as communication apprehension, anxiety, self-esteem, and introversion-extroversion (p. 546). While both L1 and L2 WTC will include trait-like variables, they are clearly different, and the model proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1998) added important situational variables unique to L2 use such as the familiarity of the interlocutors, the formality of the situation, language ability, the number of people involved and, for the purpose of this classroom research study, the topic of discussion. Peng and Woodrow (2010) summarized this new situational model as highlighting L2 WTC as a "composite variable influenced by the joint effect of variables both internal and external to individual learners" (p. 835).

According to MacIntyre et al. (1998), the point at which L2 use (i.e., communication) ultimately occurs is controlled by any number of variables. The authors differentiate these into two categories: enduring influences such as learner personality, proficiency level and previous learning experiences, and the more immediate situational factors such as who the interlocutor is, comfort level, group dynamic, and knowledge of the topic (p. 546). Understanding WTC in this way, with an emphasis on the primacy of situational variables, is helpful and practical for language teachers because it increases the probability that we can bring our learners to that very important point where they are most likely to use the L2 to communicate something meaningful in a real communicative setting. A key contribution of MacIntyre et al. (1998) is in noting that "the ultimate goal of the learning process should be to engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness to actually communicate in them. That is, a proper objective for L2 education is to create WTC" (p. 547).

Before more directly focusing on situational WTC, it is important to note that many empirical studies have continued to confirm the complexity of L2 WTC as being influenced by certain trait-like personal and individual variables such as self-confidence (Clément et al., 2003) and motivational dispositions like attitude and effort (Noels et al., 2000). Another important trait-like individual variable directly related to motivation and L2 WTC, and particularly relevant to this study, is that of 'international posture', which was first identified in the Japan EFL context by Yashima (2002). She hypothesized that international posture was "a general attitude toward the international community that influences English learning and communication among Japanese learners" (Yashima, 2002, pp. 62–63). Included in international posture are "interest in foreign or international affairs, willingness to go overseas to stay or work, readiness to interact with intercultural partners, and, one hopes, openness or a non-ethnocentric attitude toward different cultures, among others" (p. 57). Because international posture and L2 communication confidence were shown to be essential for WTC, the author recommends that EFL teachers in Japan should promote L2 learning in two ways. First, they should design their lessons and choose materials in such a way that focuses student interest on international matters and, second, English classes in Japan should be conducted in a way that reduces anxiety and builds confidence. This attitudinal international posture construct was later proven to lead directly to L2 WTC (Yashima et al., 2004). Yashima (2009) has argued that Japanese learners can develop an ideal L2 self as English users when guided through educational activities that promote international posture (p. 161). Clearly, such trait-like variables are fundamental to understanding and facilitating L2 WTC.

WTC Research Developments Focusing on Situational Factors

For the purposes of this study, however, I am primarily concerned with the studies that have steered L2 WTC research more in the direction of addressing contextual and situational factors. It is these studies that are most immediately relevant to language teachers because they focus more directly on pedagogical implications. Findings from these growing number of studies can help teachers to steer their classroom practice in ways that best facilitate WTC among our language learners. One of the most influential studies was done by Kang (2005). Working with ESL learners in the US, he found that situational WTC is dynamic and re-defined WTC as follows: "Willingness to communicate (WTC) is an individual's volitional inclination towards actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation, which can vary according to interlocutor(s), topic, and

conversational context, among other potential situational variables" (p. 291). This directly implies that pedagogical intervention can influence learner WTC. He specifically identifies topic, including the topic selection process and using a variety of topics, as a situational factor that teachers can manipulate to create the highest level of WTC readiness (p. 290), and introduced a new model (Figure 1) focusing specifically on situational variables such as topic, interlocutors, and conversational context and how these can affect ultimate L2 WTC. In this model, we can see the more richly textured aspects of these three variables and how they come together at once to create the psychological antecedents to situational WTC. The topic, for example, includes interest, knowledge, personal experiences, cultural sensitivity, and prior experience discussing it, all which factor into the feeling of security, excitement and responsibility that might propel a learner to the point of communication (p. 288).

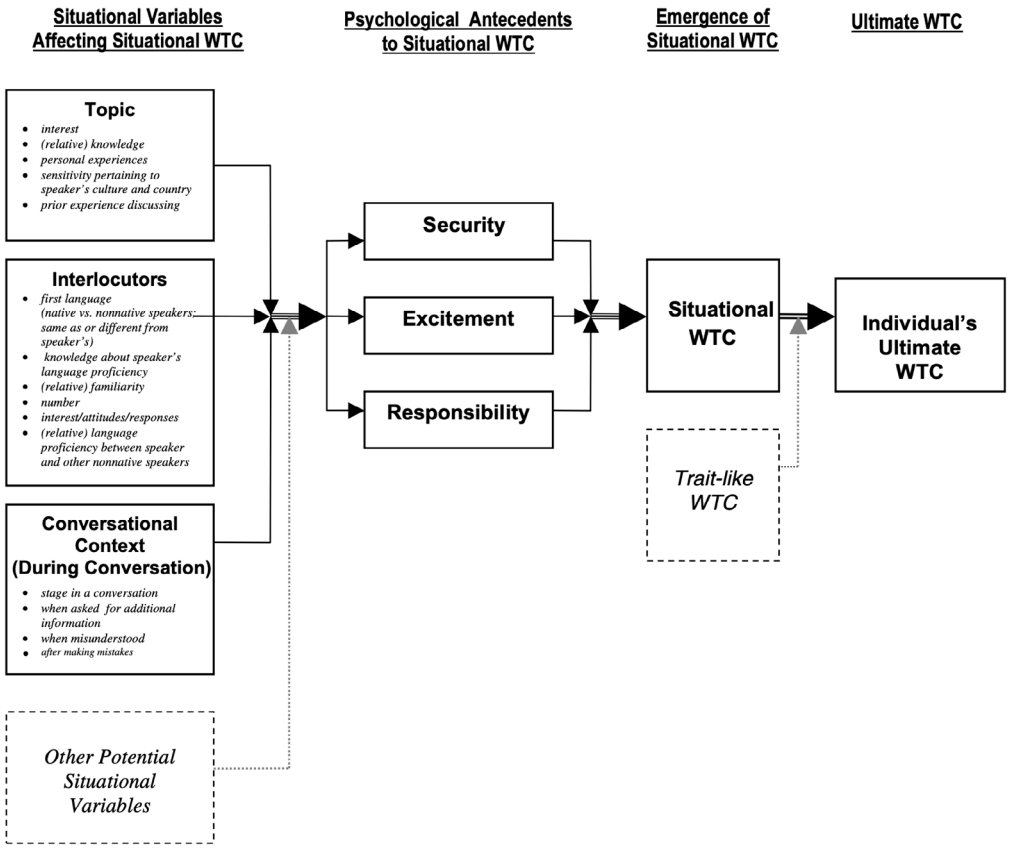

Figure 1. *A preliminary construct of situational willingness to communicate (Kang, 2005, p. 288)*

Other studies undertaken in ESL contexts that represent the research trend to focus more on situational factors that can inform teaching practice can be found in Cao and Philp (2006), who investigated the interactional context, including cultural background and familiarity with the topic. They found that although the overall effect of topic was complex, interest in the topic was vital. Later, Cao (2011; 2014) investigated situational WTC from an ecological perspective as a way of understanding how several interrelated factors and variables influence L2 WTC in situated,

context-specific classrooms at given points in time. Because L2 learners exhibit different levels of WTC at different times during a language class, and because this affects how their performance is perceived by teachers and classmates, Cao (2011) makes the case that WTC should be measured in terms of situated L2 classroom variables such as what kind of interaction is occurring, what kind of task the learners are involved in, and the topics being discussed. An important finding from the Cao (2011) study is that these dimensions that influence WTC are not distinct and isolated, but rather are interrelated (p. 474). These factors come together to either facilitate or inhibit WTC at different times during a single class. To ensure maximal WTC, teachers need to be aware that WTC is highly context-specific and that it can be enhanced through the provision of carefully selected activities and topics.

L2 WTC in EFL Contexts

Shifting to studies on situational WTC in EFL contexts, the dynamic nature of L2 WTC has been examined in Poland where Pawlak and Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2015) found in a mixed-method study that their participants' WTC changed frequently depending on variables such as the topic and how much time they had to prepare, language ability, interlocutor familiarity, and the presence of the teacher/researcher. Their study controlled for topic type (linguistically and conceptually undemanding topics) and time spent on topic (10 minutes). Their research showed that finding "a suitable topic is not as straightforward as might seem" (p. 8). Working with university EFL learners in Pakistan, Bukhari et al. (2105) found that higher situational WTC can be achieved when students discuss topics among friends and in smaller groups to help alleviate cultural factors such as saving face (p. 43). Reporting from Iran, Zarrinabadi (2014) found that teacher decisions on topic was among the most prominent of four factors influencing WTC, noting that giving students more freedom to choose the topic led to significantly higher WTC and classroom participation (pp. 292–293). In a small-scale case study of four university EFL learners in China, Peng (2012) found that "WTC is socioculturally constructed as a function of the interaction of individual and environmental factors, both inside and outside the classroom" (p. 211) and that classroom culture and peer reticence are likely to impede WTC. Peng's (2012) study also showed that "self-perception of competence may emerge only when one has ideas and possesses the linguistic resources to express them" (p. 210). This indicates an important link about how topics are selected in EFL classes. Yashima (2009) similarly noted that "unless one has something to say about a topic or opinions to express about an agenda, one does not have an urge to communicate" (p. 155).

L2 WTC Research in the Japan Context

Following on from Yashima's (2002) influential study, a number of WTC studies have been conducted in the Japanese EFL context across a variety of age groups. A qualitative study by Yashima et al. (2018) marked a first attempt to research state-like situated WTC in tandem with enduring trait-like L2 WTC to better understand how learners choose to communicate, or not, in L2 classrooms. The researchers examined the connection between learner characteristics (trait-like WTC) and emergent contextual classroom factors (situated WTC) in terms of how they dynamically affect the ultimate decision to communicate in the L2 at a given time in a particular class, or at different times throughout the longer course. The researchers took an interventional approach to

analyze group-level communication behavior as a whole and the individual experience within the group. They designed a 12-week interventional study to encourage student-initiated communication among Japanese EFL learners. Their stated goal was to "capture WTC as readiness to initiate communication when given a choice" (Yashima et al., 2018, p. 120). By encouraging learners to initiate more communication than is common in quiet EFL classroom contexts like Japan, the authors created a classroom environment where the L2 learners could more freely decide to communicate. The authors found that during the discussions, individual students paid close attention to contextual factors (topic, other students' reactions, and atmosphere) which at times both facilitated and constrained their WTC (p. 132). Pedagogical implications were clear in that when teacher control was removed, and communication activities were prearranged, students as a group met the challenge more than expected. Thus, creating similar class opportunities where students can self-initiate is necessary. They found that quiet students also need more focused skills training in asking questions and commenting on peer turns (pp. 132–133).

Other WTC studies related to the Japan context have yielded mixed results. A large-scale quantitative study of first-year university learners conducted by Fushino (2010) found that it is difficult for teachers to directly elevate WTC during group work (p. 717). A longitudinal study by Watanabe (2013) found that WTC largely remained unchanged over the three years of high school which was attributed to limited opportunities for communication and a lack of knowledge about international topics (pp. 165–166). In a more recent study conducted with novice junior high school learners, Toyoda et al. (2021) investigated whether task-based learning improves situational WTC and found that perceived task competence along with enjoyment and engagement with the task were the main predictors of WTC (p. 205). A case study by Osterman (2014) involving Japanese university EFL learners drew attention to how previous grammar-based learning experiences can negatively affect WTC.

L2 WTC Research in Japan: The Importance of Topic Selection

A small-scale task-related study using videotaped conversations and stimulated recall interviews was conducted by Toyoda and Yashima (2021) who found that two contextual factors (the familiarity/proficiency of the interlocutor and the task condition factor involving topic and task difficulty) impacted WTC. With specific reference to topic, they found that interest in the topic had a clear WTC-stimulating or WTC-reducing effect (p. 114). In sum, participants were less "willing to communicate on topics that are unfamiliar, uninteresting, or irrelevant to them" (p. 118). It is worth noting here that students identified the WTC-reducing effect in reference to topics commonly used in their textbooks (p. 118). More generally, Putrone and Beh (2018) have found that task-based language teaching can improve WTC especially when controlled for topics that were fun and familiar, and grounded in realistic English use (p. 583).

A recent study of four Japanese language learners by Sato (2020) examined how situational WTC emerges and fluctuates during communicative events. He found that "interest in the topic was most frequently pointed out as a factor for high WTC (p. 11). Sato (2020) clearly calls for flexibility and care when teachers select topics for communication activities among lower-intermediate speakers (p. 12). Finally, Ducker's (2022) investigation into factors that create a gap between WTC and actual learner talk found mixed results about how topic influences WTC among Japanese university EFL learners. On one hand, lack of knowledge or interest about a topic may simply

reduce WTC but even when students have sufficient and relevant topic knowledge, they may still struggle to develop the conversation and WTC can suffer (p. 232). He calls for teachers to take an "agentive approach" (p. 236) about teaching strategies related to helping students better respond during talk, how to develop and change the topic, share the floor, and be more aggressive in asking follow-up questions.

Cultural Influences on Japanese EFL Learners' WTC

L2 learners from certain cultures also face additional challenges in actuating L2 WTC. In particular, learners from some East Asian cultures like Japan may need extra pedagogical support in facilitating their WTC. It is not only the immediate educational culture of traditional teacher-centered, grammar-focused, exam-oriented Asian classrooms that can inhibit WTC. Broader cultural factors are at play too. Learners may have sound linguistic knowledge and a desire to communicate, but this can be hindered by high context communication styles that undervalue speaking out in class for various reasons such as respecting age differences, not wishing to stand out, and over-reliance on nonverbal communication. For Japanese learners, Takanishi (2004) has summarized the aspects of Japanese communicative culture that have a negative effect on motivation to learn English. He suggests that the Japanese 'dual structured' communication style of distinguishing between inner and outer states of mind, the strategic use of tacit understanding to guess what others are thinking, and high-context politeness all work together to inhibit the more direct communication and open expression required in English (pp. 6–11). This is clearly relevant to L2 WTC.

All of these cultural factors can be manifested in the silence that is commonly attributed to Japanese English learners, and this cultural tendency toward silence is a real issue for teachers seeking to facilitate WTC. King (2013) has provided a comprehensive list of silence-related cultural factors that are common in Japanese university English classes and impede good language learner behavior (p. 337). The cultural tendency to value silence has also been addressed in Yashima et al. (2016) who through an interventionist study sought ways to deal with this tendency, mainly through less teacher involvement and giving students greater autonomy to guide discussions (p. 105). In more practice-related research reports, Aubrey (2011) has listed several useful ways to overcome these barriers and enhance student interaction and WTC in the classroom, one of which relates to increased focus on topic relevancy and making greater efforts to integrate student interests (p. 240). In working with Japanese EFL learners, a helpful and productive summary of what students need from teachers to address silence and foster better communication is provided by Harumi (2011). The essential role that teachers play in facilitating L2 WTC with Asian learners has also been reported by Vongsila and Reinders (2016). They noted, however, that among strategies used by teachers to encourage WTC, increasing students' familiarity with topics used in class was the least used among their teacher participants (p. 6). In short, it is not possible for teachers to increase L2 WTC among Japanese EFL learners without a clear understanding of the cultural factors affecting their language learning behavior and communication styles.

Summary

By way of summary of this literature review, we can draw from MacIntyre (2007) who notes that L2 WTC is very much a volitional process that can rise and fall depending on the situation. He

concludes that L2 WTC models should be considered as a state of readiness to communicate rather than solely characterized by trait-like characteristics influenced by the situation (p. 568). Because psychological, pedagogical, situational, cultural, and linguistic factors come together in a dynamic momentary way and intersect precisely at the point when a L2 speaker decides to communicate, he suggests research should focus on how the process of WTC can be stimulated at a specific time with a specific learner (p. 573). Yashima (2012) has also examined the volitional aspect of WTC and has suggested that topic familiarity, topic interest, and the ability to initiate and direct topics can directly affect WTC in real time. Based on these suggestions, my study examines the degree to which topic choice affects WTC among three Japanese EFL learners.

Action Research Project Description

In action research (AR), teachers take a "self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach" (Burns, 2010, p. 2) to improve teaching and learning in a specific context. According to Burns (2005), "the *action* component involves participants in a process of planned intervention, where concrete strategies, process or activities are developed within the research context" (p. 58). Burns (2005) further identifies "the *research* element of AR involves the systematic collection of data as planned interventions are enacted, followed by analysis of what is revealed by the data, and reflection on the implications of the findings for further observation and action" (p. 59). There is an important cyclical aspect to AR which highlights planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Burns (2010) notes that in AR "the changes made in the teaching situations arise from solid information rather than from our hunches or assumptions about the way we think things are" (p. 2). Much insight can be gained from asking research participants about what discussion topics affect their situational WTC at various moments.

Participants

The participants of this research project were three female university students who will be referred to in this study under the pseudonyms of Kimiko, Misa, and Reiko. At the time of data collection, they had just finished their second year in early February 2023. Their first year started in April 2021 when all university classes were taught online. They got to know each other as peers during synchronous online English language classes in which they experienced small group discussions in breakout rooms. During their second year, when students returned to classrooms, they enrolled in the EPIC program (English Program for International Communication), an intensive six-course program consisting of skills based and applied courses taught by three native English speaker professors. There is an entrance test (speaking and writing) for the EPIC program and the minimal entrance requirement of CEFR B1.2 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, Japan CEFR scales). Thus, the three participating students have clear motivation to improve their English-speaking skills and a demonstrated intermediate-level English proficiency. When I first met these students, they were already friends and had already established a comfortable relationship even when communicating only in English.

Intervention

In designing an intervention to examine how the topic and the method of topic selection affect WTC for the learners in group discussions, I planned to provide three different topics for each weekly lesson over a three-week period. This meant that they would discuss nine different topics face-to-face over three weeks, meeting face-to-face in a small university classroom. The students sat facing each other in a comfortable environment. My role as teacher was to facilitate the discussions by keeping the time and giving topics (three topics each lesson), but otherwise I did not participate in their discussions so that their natural WTC could emerge and change with the flow of the discussion without any prompt or input from the teacher while they were talking. In every discussion lesson, three different methods of topic selection were used, and students spent 10 minutes on each one, which was extended up to 15 minutes if the discussion was going well. To address my research question, the three topic-types were distinctively characterized as shown in Table 1. All three lessons used the same style/format each time.

Table 1. *Method of topic selection*

	Method of topic selection	Description
Topic-type 1	An agreed topic (chosen by students)	Topic is decided by the students immediately prior to the discussion
Topic-type 2	A common CEFR B1 level topic	Chosen by students from a list of three options provided by the teacher, with different sets of topics each time
Topic-type 3	A topic based on the students' common experience	A topic that the teacher provides

Three topics were discussed every lesson in the above order with a short break between each discussion. At the beginning of each lesson, a video recording was started, and discussions were audio-recorded as well for back-up purposes. There was always some casual talking in English between the students and I prior to the discussions to help them relax. This also naturally helped change the language medium of the class into English only. For the Topic-type 1 selection, students were given a few minutes to choose whatever they wanted to talk about just before the discussion began. For the Topic-type 2 selection, the students each received a list of three commonly used CEFR B1 topics the teacher had chosen and printed on a paper strip, and they discussed which one of the three topics to select just before the discussion. For the Topic-type 3 selection, they were given a topic just before their discussion started. Two minutes were given to think individually about what content they wanted to discuss for both Type 2 and Type 3 topics. This means that for each of the three topic selection types, there was minimal preparation time.

Data Collection Methods

WTC questionnaire

After the participants signed an informed consent document, a questionnaire was given to each of them to assess their WTC-related individual traits: their L1 Japanese WTC, and their L2 English WTC, and their *international posture*. Although my study was focused on *situational* WTC, these data were collected to be referenced as a way of analyzing each participant's trait-like WTC. The

questionnaire scales were adapted from Yashima (2009). I translated the items of the scales into Japanese and randomized the international posture items. I also added eight item statements to add variation to the original 20 items which are so similar that they can potentially cause survey fatigue. The participating students completed this customized questionnaire which included 28 closed items (a 6-point Likert scale, selecting among six options) and one short open item of free writing in Japanese (see Appendix A). Then, the items were translated back into English and sorted back into the correct order.

Observation of discussion activity lessons

The three discussion activity lessons were conducted over a three-week period. I carefully observed how each student interacted with each other during the discussions. These lessons were the most important source of data where the pedagogical intervention was planned, so the lessons were video recorded. This allowed me to capture important non-verbal interactions, helping me to better reflect, review, and analyze the interactional data later when I could observe the discussions more carefully about whatever small things I may not have noticed during the class. Regarding the observation of the lessons, not only during the discussion time but also the time before the Type-2 topic discussions was observed because it was important to see how the students chose one topic to discuss from the three listed topics provided by the teacher.

Stimulated-recall Interviews

Stimulated-recall interviews (SRIs) followed all three discussion lessons. Noting that nearly all qualitative classroom research involves interview data, Baker and Lee (2011) identify SRIs as effective in making the interview data more reliable (p. 1441). My three participants agreed to be interviewed individually online after each lesson for a total of nine interviews, and each SRI took about 45–60 minutes. The SRIs were conducted in Japanese and video-recorded using the Zoom recording function. The students were interviewed in a very relaxed way, with plenty of time provided to reflect their feelings at the very moment of selected stimulated-recall points. Using SRIs helped to ensure valid data collection. The particular moments in the discussions I identified using the SR questions were (1) the reasons of their turn taking – who led the turn decisions and how that happened at a particular moment, (2) how they felt when they were quiet and how they tried to break the silence, (3) how they felt when asking questions and when being asked, (4) how they felt when they couldn't say a certain word or were helped, or vice versa, and (5) how they felt when a member reacted or summarized what they said. Examples of these were presented to each student with a description from me about what I noticed, along with a verbal explanation of the words they used, the reactions they made, and specific interactions so that they could recall the particular moment.

Data Analysis

All the data were collected from late February through mid-March 2023. First, data from the closed-ended questionnaire items were analyzed. The survey data that I collected provided important insights to supplement my broader analysis of the qualitative data.

The students' trait WTC was measured through a survey to explore their general WTC and *international posture*. The two scales I used were adapted from Yashima (2009, pp. 162–163). Using

her WTC scale, I measured not only their L2 WTC but also L1 WTC. The international posture scale I used was also adapted from Yashima (2009). This updated version of the international posture scale consists of four aspects: (1) Intergroup approach-avoidance tendency; (2) Interest in international vocation or activities; (3) Interest in international news; (4) Having things to communicate to the world. Each aspect includes four to six items. I calculated the numbers from the questionnaire results and presented these by the means (i.e., averages) as shown in Table 2 below. This was done, first, by reversing the numbers on the 6-point Likert scale items which were negatively worded. There were seven such items. I then eliminated the eight additional items that do not relate to the original Yashima (2009) scales. The four categories of international posture scales were then sorted back to the correct order. The numbers in the table represent the means (i.e., averages) out of a maximum of 6. For L1 and L2 WTC, scores were calculated using the same 6-point Likert scale used by Yashima (2009).

Table 2. *The participants' L1 WTC, L2 WTC, and international posture*

	Kimiko	Misa	Reiko
L1 WTC	4.88	5.13	5.75
L2 WTC	5.63	4.13	5.25
Intergroup approach-avoidance tendency	5.50	4.50	5.83
Interest in international vocation or activities	4.50	4.00	5.67
Interest in international news	3.50	3.25	4.25
Having things to communicate to the world	4.50	3.50	4.75

Qualitative Data

Analysis of the topics and their effect on discussions

To address my research question on learners' L2 WTC as it relates to topic and topic selection, the analysis was mainly based on qualitative data. To more fully understand situational WTC, Cao (2011) has noted that "the only reasonable empirical way to look for evidence of WTC in class was in actual communication which was voluntary but not forced" (p. 470). Following the same rationale, I also used actual communication in class with students who were keen to express themselves in English, i.e., how the students communicated in the classroom discussions, as the main form of WTC data collection. All nine group topic discussions were video-recorded and transcribed, and a total of nine SRIs with individual participants after the discussion lessons were also videotaped and summarized for categorizing and coding.

Findings

Before describing the findings related to topic and topic selection, it is necessary to examine the personal nature and characteristics of the three participating students because the decisions they made while speaking English in the discussion activities were partially based on their broader WTC traits. MacIntrye et al. (1998) identify this WTC variable as a more enduring influence on L2 WTC which should therefore precede the more immediate situational influence of topic. Therefore, in this section, I will introduce the survey results.

Survey Results

WTC characteristics of the participating students

The survey results were impressive for how accurately they seem to reflect the students' basic traits, based what I actually learned about their nature and characteristics through my observations and interviews. First, the students' *interest in international news* was generally low, especially with Kimiko and Misa. This should be considered when analyzing their preference of discussion topics. Second, Kimiko's L2 WTC was the strongest among the three students and even stronger than her L1 WTC. In all nine discussions I observed, she naturally took the role of leading the discussion, which must be related to this high L2 WTC trait. Third, although Misa is the most fluent English speaker of the three, her L2 WTC scores and international posture aspects are significantly lower than the other two. This is interesting considering that her speaking proficiency was clearly the best of the three. She scored especially low in the aspect: *'having things to communicate to the world.'* Fourth, Reiko appears to have by far the highest level of international posture among the three. However, she is obviously the weakest when it comes to speaking English because she only started communicating in English after entering university two years ago. Considering this, it is impressive that her L2 WTC is higher than Misa's, who started learning to speak English in Grade 7 and who had demonstrated communicative success prior to entering university. All of this is very much in line with MacIntrye et al. (1998) who note that L1 and L2 WTC are very different and do not always correlate (p. 546).

Topics and WTC

Discussion being unfamiliar among Japanese

One thing that surprised me was that all three students had never experienced discussion activities in their L1 in the sense of students interacting and thinking critically about their questions or learning from their peers' responses. Kimiko, who said she had frequently experienced L2 discussion classes and had been coached to learn skills to be a moderator/facilitator of L2 discussions, mentioned that she did not think she would be able to take a similar moderator role in an equivalent discussion activity in her Japanese L1. It is true that the Japanese generally do not use discussion activities in school education; not only students but also teachers often have no fixed image or idea of what a "discussion" is. I would go so far as to say that even many Japanese teachers have no model in mind about how an English discussion should proceed. The discussion I describe in this research is a "small group discussion" which is different from discussions in a more general meaning where turn taking follows a more set pattern.

Non-preferred topics

To summarize what the three students expressed to me in the post-discussion interviews about the characteristic of topics that reduce their WTC, such topics are the ones that they feel unfamiliar, unimportant, and unrelated to them – something they don't think about regularly and something they think hard to discuss even in their L1 Japanese. This seems fair, and then the difficulty lies in the gap between what topics are familiar to students and what topics teachers decide they think are familiar to students. The topics used in my research are shown in Table 3:

Table 3. *Discussion topics*

Lesson No.	Topic-type No.	Topics
1	1	University Life
	2	(Chosen from three 'Language Learning' topics) What is the most difficult part of learning English and why? Reading, writing, speaking or listening?
	3	What would you recommend to people visiting Kochi?
2	1	Experiences Abroad
	2	(Chosen from three 'Food' topics) Do you ever eat junk food? What's your favorite junk food?
	3	How has COVID affected your English learning experience?
3	1	Free Time
	2	(Chosen from three 'Likes and Dislikes' topics) Would you like to travel around the world?
	3	What does Japan need to do to have greater gender equality?

Among the nine topics the group discussed, the least preferred topic, on which all of them readily agreed, was: *'What would you recommend to people visiting Kochi?'* This was from the Topic-type 3 group based on what I, as the teacher, thought would be an interesting topic choice based on their common experience as people from Kochi. Their reason was that it is difficult to talk about a place (Kochi) that they do not know much about. I chose the topic as a 'common experience' topic and never thought that the students might state that they do not know enough to tell others about the place where they were born and raised. All of them wanted some time to think about what they could say, reporting that they had felt responsible for what they would say about this topic, because to recommend something would have a direct effect to others – it is very different from just talking about one's opinion or one's experience. In this regard, a clear link can be made with Kang's (2005) findings related to how topic selection can promote a feeling of security (or insecurity). A lack of ideas or a lack of background knowledge can lead to feeling of insecurity which, in turn, creates a WTC burden (p. 283).

Topics that may confuse students

Two topics created some confusion in the discussion. There are some gaps, even very small, between a teacher's intention and students' perceptions when the students read and understand the written topic. In EFL classrooms, such misunderstanding is hard to predict and particularly in Japanese classrooms, such gaps, even when found, would generally not be reported or corrected through negotiation of meaning. In fact, I had no idea these two common topics could cause such confusion. Both were from Topic-type 2 sets where the students chose one from the list of three topics. They liked and chose to talk about these topics: *'Do you ever eat junk food? What's your favorite junk food?'* and *'Would you like to travel around the world?'* For the first one, when they initially started talking, they seemed to address the topic but as they were not sure what 'junk food' actually was, the discussion became more about defining it. For the latter topic, they were not sure of what 'travel around the world' meant – at first two of them thought 'around the world' might literally mean – around the earth. The students communicated for clearer definition, so it worked out fine, but one can imagine that in larger classes of 40 false beginner students made up of 10

or more small groups, these kinds of topics would easily cause various troubles and consequently affect students' WTC. The discussion topics need to be worded very carefully, especially in an EFL context where students are not culturally familiar with real English lifestyle topics. Such misunderstanding and confusion caused by ambiguous topics can potentially impede students' WTC.

Preferred topics: Broad topics

The topics that received the most positive feedback in terms of improving their WTC were the Topic-type 1 topics that the students could independently choose. After the three classes and a total of nine individual interviews, the most preferred topics were always the ones they had chosen by themselves which were all relatively broad topics. The reasons given for why each of these topics had a positive impact on their WTC were interesting and valuable to me.

One reason why they chose short phrase topics for all three sessions was because topics such as *'University Life'* and *'Free Time'* can cover a wide range of daily activities which can be expressed with everyday vocabulary and, at the same time, the discussion can include meaningful information exchange with each other. We can make the case that this is very much the same when talking in an L1. When talking about a broad daily topic in our L1, everyone can confidently change to another smaller related topic and reply to what the other person has said. For typical high school Japanese false beginners to discuss a topic in English, even things like changing topics can be difficult because they must do this in English. Still, it is easy for most high school students to use phrases such as *How about you?, Why?,* and *I think so too!* Once they learn that these common conversational negotiation phrases can be helpful to manage their discussions, starting from only limited phrases and keeping English discussions going is more manageable. This would make false beginner students more comfortable and have a positive effect on their L2 WTC.

Fear of silence was identified as another reason for broad topic preference. After observing the discussions in this study, I found that the silence in conversations among the three participating students which they could tolerate was about up to 10 seconds. It is reasonable to prefer a topic that can be discussed broadly, because changing the subject is easier than when talking about a narrower topic. From a teacher's point of view, if it is a discussion, a topic should probably be a little narrower than *'University Life'* and *'Free Time'.* However, the topic students should discuss does not really matter because the aim here is fluency development; as long as they keep speaking about something in English on a daily basis for fluency practice, a discussion activity topic does not have to be linguistically challenging or socially 'heavy'. If the activity is not a discussion but more like a conversation, that should be fine if there is real meaningful communication.

Conversation versus discussion

Another thing that arose about topic preferences is related to how discussion and conversation are differentiated. Misa said, "Topics like 'University Life' and 'Free Time' are good because it doesn't feel like a debate," which indicates that for some students, the prospect of a classroom activity discussion can, in itself, hinder their WTC from the start. Misa told me that she wanted to make this discussion opportunity more like natural conversation, but Kimiko seemed to like to keep it as a discussion rather than a conversation. Misa also commented that their level of English is not yet at a level where they can raise their fluency in English by discussing more complex social issues. This is true in several ways. In the SRIs, they all commented on the moments when they wanted to use a word, but it did not come to them in the discussion. When this happened, they had

to explain somehow, with extra effort, what they wanted to say. In such moments they struggled to say something, hoping that the efforts they made to communicate were successful, but never being sure about it. When this happens, Misa said her WTC usually goes down for a while.

On the other hand, Reiko said in such moments, her WTC does not change and will remain strong. Reiko said that if she was given a topic about more complicated social issues, she would like to talk more about it. Additionally, if she was given the topics in advance, she would be interested in researching about them beforehand and would enjoy discussing them in class. Based on the survey and my observation of the lessons, Reiko's interest in international news and social issues was much stronger than the other two. Reiko scored high in L2 WTC as well as in her international posture results. In the interview, she also said that for the last topic *'What does Japan need to do to have greater gender equality?'* she took the first turn among the three to initiate speaking about her opinion, because she is really interested in this topic. Students like Reiko want teachers to implement lessons with group discussions and to make effective lessons that facilitate both language and critical thinking development. Although it may seem more effective to choose easy and broad topics like *'Free Time'* and *'University Life'* in ordinary Japanese high schools, some students like Reiko would appreciate narrower and socially challenging topics than such broader *'Free Time'* topics.

Topic that prompted the highest WTC

The other topic they chose by themselves was the topic of *'Experiences Abroad'*. They displayed a high WTC on this topic, and they actually talked for close to 20 minutes when I had to stop the discussion. This again supports what Kang (2005) found in relation to the influence of topic in establishing excitement, which is an antecedent leading to the act of communicating in a particular situation (p. 284). My participants obviously showed excitement about this topic – they were interested, they had common experiences, and this mutual background experience seemed to trigger a desire to communicate. When the three students decided on this topic, they said they asked each other and made sure that all of them had been abroad. This topic will not be used unless everyone has traveled abroad, so it is not a good idea to use it in a class of 40 high school students, for example. They said that they had never talked in Japanese about this topic. They asked each other far more questions than they usually do for other topics. In my observation, their WTC was obviously the highest during this topic.

Difficult aspects of topic characteristics

Misa's words here include something important: "If a topic can cover a wide range of topics, we can avoid a smaller topic that one of the group members doesn't want to talk about." For example, on the topic of 'favorite food,' I asked the three students in the post-discussion interview about what they would do if they disliked a food that one of the group members mentions as favorite food. Reiko noted that, "With the three of us, I can say 'I don't like that' without hesitation, and that wouldn't change my WTC, but I might have to change what I may say with others." This kind of anxiety and reduced WTC was observed when they were talking about 'Free Time'. Their topic changed to course grades that had just been issued, and Misa asked Kimiko "How did you do?" Kimiko did not look particularly worried or embarrassed, but in the SRI, she said she did not want to answer but that she did not know what to say to politely refuse answering the question. She said that this affected her WTC for a while. Pragmatically correct ways to effectively maneuver away from what

the other person says, or to refuse answering personal questions that they do not want to answer, were beyond their speaking abilities. This obviously limits L2 WTC.

Use of Japanese words in discussion

Misa noted that she prefers to avoid topics with many proper nouns that can only be expressed in Japanese, because it is difficult to revert back to English pronunciation after saying the word in Japanese. For her, in moments when she gets confused between English pronunciation and Japanese pronunciation, her anxiety goes up and her WTC goes down. This could be a factor in why she did not prefer the 'What would you recommend to people visiting Kochi?' topic because this would involve using a lot of Japanese words like food items and place names.

Misa also said that it is difficult for most students to use English to explain English words that they do not know or cannot recall at a specific moment. To make matters worse, when a speaker tries hard to explain the word or to look up the word, the listener tends to lose the overall meaning of what the speaker was trying to express, and it often ends up being difficult to get back to the discussion point. This seems to have a negative effect to the group WTC. She said that, therefore, it can often be better to simply insert Japanese words/phrases, but this usually leads to pronunciation difficulties for her. This was a thought-provoking comment. The point to consider when selecting topics that improve WTC is whether the topic would necessitate the use of common L1 words in the English discussion. In this case, using some L1 words can potentially both help and hinder WTC.

Topic Selection Methods and WTC

As noted, there were three topic-type interventions. In this study, the condition that fostered the highest level of WTC was the Type 1 selection method which was an agreed topic chosen by students. This was followed by the Type 2 selection method which was to select a topic from a list of three options provided by the teacher. The least favored topic selection method was Type 3, which was a topic chosen by me based on my presumption that a topic related to their shared experience would initiate discussion.

Type 1: An agreed topic (chosen by students)

All three topics in the Topic-type 1 category were the topics that the students liked the best. They said that they felt responsible for the topics they initiated. They also agreed that their WTC would increase because they would be active rather than passive toward the topic. This suggests that it may be good to let students choose a topic for themselves. However, allowing students to choose their discussion topic seems to have some weakness too. Kimiko noted that choosing such daily topics may cover what the group members already know from being friends. Reiko said that in a group with people she doesn't know so well, she may not be interested in listening to what the others share about what they do, making her WTC decrease. They noted that choosing a good topic was difficult every time they had to select the Topic-type 1 category. Therefore, one possible reason why choosing topics by students themselves was most successful in this research may be related to the limited number of times they had to choose – only three times. If students regularly have time for L2 discussions, choosing a topic by themselves may be appealing and might have

a good effect on their WTC, but it may be that allowing students to choose should only be done occasionally.

Type 2: A common CEFR B1 level topic (chosen by students from a list of three options)
For this topic-type, I chose topics which are at the CEFR B1 level. I searched common CEFR B1 topics on the Internet, and narrowed the categories down to three (Learning English, food, likes and dislikes) which I thought the participating students would like and be comfortable with. After that, I selected the three best topic prompts to fit this research occasion. The three categories and the nine topics from which the students selected are as follows:

B1 topics – learning English (the first lesson)
1. What is the most difficult part of learning English and why? Reading, writing, speaking or listening?
2. Will English be useful for you in the future?
3. What is the best way to learn English?

B1 topics – food (the second lesson)
4. Do you ever eat junk food? What's your favorite junk food?
5. What is your favourite food and why?
6. Can you cook well? Are you interested in cooking?

B1 topics – likes and dislikes (the third lesson)
7. How often do you listen to music in your free time?
8. Are you interested in foreign languages besides English?
9. Would you like to travel around the world?

Type 3: A topic based on the students' common experience (chosen by the teacher)
For Topic-type 3, I chose the topics based on the students' common experience. The topics had to be both familiar and relevant to the students and the society they were familiar with. The topics were decided based on what I thought would be interesting for them. Since the Type 3 topic in the first lesson (recommending something about Kochi) was not well liked, the topics for the second and third lessons were carefully considered to meet their needs. Since the first topic on Day 2 was 'Experiences Abroad', the third topic in the same lesson was selected as: 'How has COVID affected your English learning experience?' because these two topics I thought could have shared some of the same discussion points. On Day 3, the Type 3 topic I chose was: 'What does Japan need to do to have greater gender equality?' Gender issues were thought to be one of the most familiar social issues for them because I heard that they had studied about gender in their EPIC courses.

Discussion

For the most part, this small classroom research supports previous research findings, especially related to topic selection. The most specific WTC research related to the effect of topic was done by Kang (2005) and his model focuses specifically on situational variables such as topic, interlocutors, and conversational context. The participating students in my study reported that they felt most excited communicating on the topic of their experiences abroad and, conversely, felt least interested about recommending something from their local area to others when given this topic

by the teacher, mainly due to discomfort about being responsible for something that might affect another person's experience. Clearly the topic was proven to be an important situational variable, as Kang (2005) found. It was clear from my findings that topic interest, topic knowledge, personal experiences with the topic, and other topic-specific matters affected the three participants' WTC.

Indeed, the most important finding related to my research question was that WTC will decrease when students find the topics unfamiliar or unsatisfying in some way. The participating students claimed that they felt their WTC decreased when they perceive the topics as irrelevant to their reality. MacIntyre et al. (1998) stated: "It is easy to recognize that the topic of the communication will significantly affect the ease of language use: Topical expertise and the familiarity with a certain register will boost one's self-confidence, whereas a lack of these may inhibit even a generally confident speaker." (p. 554). Toyoda and Yashima (2021) also found a decrease in "willingness to communicate on topics that are unfamiliar, uninteresting, or irrelevant to them" (p. 118). How to prepare topics that avoid these feelings is the challenge for teachers. One thing that is certain from my small classroom research findings is that Pawlak and Mystkowska-Wiertelak's (2015) summary words of warning that finding "a suitable topic is not as straightforward as might seem" (p. 8) are true, and teacher instincts about topic selection can be wrong. While my three participants all thought broader self-selected topics are generally better for WTC, there were clear differences even within this small group of learners. Only one of the three was stimulated by heavier topics involving social issues.

The second finding is that students see WTC value in choosing their topics by themselves and that being offered topic options to choose from seemed to raise their WTC. Depending on the relationship among the group members, students may already know how their interlocutors will process a topic and therefore WTC can be reduced. A gap in known information among interlocutors is crucial in communication, and WTC will likely decrease without it. To avoid this happening, a topic selection method should be pre-arranged in a way that students can select an appropriate topic that suits their needs from multiple topic options. This supports findings by Zarrinabadi (2014) that teacher decisions about topic strongly influenced WTC. While it may not work every time, there was evidence from my data that giving students complete freedom to choose the topic, at least occasionally, can lead to higher levels of WTC. Most effective is giving students a topic to choose from limited options. Least effective for WTC is when the teacher solely chooses the topic, unless it is well considered and is interesting, relevant and manageable for all participants. My very limited study seems to support the study by Yashima et al. (2016) who showed that less teacher involvement and giving students greater autonomy to guide discussions can improve WTC (p. 105), although this may not be possible in high school contexts with larger classes and lower general proficiency. More research would be needed to see how much student autonomy in topic selection affects WTC in secondary schools.

The third finding is that WTC increases if it is a topic that students have already thought about and have their own opinion about, at least to some extent. Personal interests and concerns about social topics differ from student to student but, for example, some students have opinions about one social topic because they have learned about it in the other class at school, while others are interested in a particular current social issue covered by the media at one particular time. Such a topic is easy to talk about because what you want to say tends to be already organized in the L1. This supports the work of both Yashima (2009) and Peng (2012) which showed that learners must know something about a topic to be able to reach that point where they are ready to express

something about it. This also speaks to the importance of allowing students time to prepare for discussion topics. If there is interest in the topic, and time to prepare what they want to express, students can establish more excitement about sharing something that is important to them. What Reiko expressed about the feeling of responsibility in leading the group discussion on the Topic type 3 (gender topic) supports Kang's (2005) finding that topics "perceived to be useful and important for the participants appeared to create responsibility to talk" (p. 285). As gender issues were important to Reiko, this was the one time she took a leadership role in initiating discussion.

Fourth, when speaking, WTC can change depending on whether the number of words and phrases that a learner can use with confidence is adequate. What one says needs to be understood by the other interlocuters. Feeling that one is making themself understood can be the most important factor affecting WTC when speaking. However, this was shown to go beyond vocabulary. Beyond vocabulary, the participants noted that not knowing how to pragmatically avoid a question, or how to lead the discussion, or request more information affects their WTC. Because each of the participants displayed different levels of conversational management skills, teachers must do more to develop basic communicative strategies that can facilitate WTC. What my participants shared in terms of acknowledging such weaknesses would seem to corroborate Ducker's (2022) call to explicitly teach strategies related to building conversational skills. Skills such as being able to change the topic at a critical time, or more effectively respond during a certain point in a discussion, can help scaffold L2 WTC as much as vocabulary learning or topic knowledge. If the speaker knows techniques that can help avoid answering something uncomfortable or that can help steer the conversation in a preferred direction, this could help maintain or improve WTC. Without such scaffolding, the likelihood will remain that students like Kimiko will experience a sharp decrease in WTC when not knowing what communication strategies to use when asked about something she would rather avoid, as she did when asked about her grades.

A fifth finding is that if a topic offers the chance to talk about personal experiences or asks for personal likes and dislikes, the content will be interesting for listeners and may increase their WTC. Students should be given more freedom, as Kang (2005) suggests, to brainstorm or be surveyed about which topics have the most personal interests among the larger group of students. The Kang (2005) study and my own study both involved a very small group of learners, so it may be difficult for teachers to find topics relevant to everyone. Based on what I have found even with this small group of three students, it would not be possible to find a topic that satisfies everyone in a larger class. However, such findings show that if we can maximize topic interest and accommodate all learners by letting smaller groups who share common interests choose their topic based on what they want to discuss, situational WTC is likely to improve.

Recommendations

This study has pedagogical implications for EFL teachers, especially those in Japan, when we consider that creating WTC should be the primary objective of L2 education (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). From a more practical point of view, I would like to consider the findings and apply the pedagogical implications by writing an activity plan that can be used in actual lessons. What should a teacher prepare for students to help them feel secure and maintain high WTC in L2 group discussion? How should such kinds of discussion activities proceed? In this hypothetical teaching context, one Japanese teacher is teaching a class of 40 Japanese high school students.

The teacher teaches them four or five 50-minute lessons a week, and in almost every lesson, the teacher can spare only 10 minutes at most for speaking practice.

What topics to prepare for students

First, students' WTC increases when they can choose their topic. With time allotted for the activity limited, I would prepare and put up a list of ten topics on a school's online communication board every week. In this way, students can vote for a topic they like. Because this seems like fun for young students and can encourage autonomy, students' WTC might rise. This allows students to prepare for the discussion before the actual class time, which is something important that my participants noted. Less regularly, maybe once a week for a change, the teacher could give a topic which is not online but presented in class just before the discussion time begins. The teacher can also ask students to contribute new topics to encourage more involvement in discussion activities.

Practice in facilitating discussions

Observing how successfully Kimiko facilitated, this is an important skill to nurture. In fact, when I told Reiko and Misa how Kimiko had learned the skill when she was in high school, both noted that they wanted to learn how to do this in the same way. With a skillful facilitator, the uncomfortable silence in discussions will be reduced, so the group WTC can be maintained. In a class with 40 false beginners, teachers must first help them build confidence in using learned phrases like "How about…?" "Really?" and "I agree." They know many phrases like these already, but oftentimes they have never used them in a real communicative setting. If they use these several times successfully in a small group among peer students, that is a first step in learning more complicated phrases.

Feedback

Quality feedback is often lacking in speaking fluency activities due to time constraints. All three students agreed that vocabulary feedback given directly after the discussion would be effective because, while speaking, students feel they lack the right words and phrases. If they were then able to ask their teachers about what they could not say while speaking, this might potentially give them the best learning opportunity. Such a procedure would help them to focus on communicative output during the discussion without stopping, knowing important feedback would soon follow. One important benefit that L2 teachers have when they share the same mother tongue as their learners is that learners quickly ask questions in their L1, and teachers can respond accordingly. Thus, planning for a few minutes for such feedback at the end of the short discussion periods is recommended. The feedback would mainly be about words and phrases in response to students' request for feedback. In other words, teachers' feedback will be based on what students want to learn.

Teacher Reflection

Reflecting on this action research (AR), I feel quite satisfied with what I have learned through the process. Burns (2010) mentions: "one of the main aims of AR is to identify a 'problematic' situation or issue that the participants – who may include teachers, students, managers, administrators, or even parents – consider worth looking into more deeply and systematically. […] The point is that, as teachers, we often see gaps between what is actually happening in our teaching situation and

what we would ideally like to see happening" (p. 2). Reflecting on my action research, I realize that I have investigated something clearly problematic and discovered a few new solutions that I had not previously considered, even as an experienced teacher.

Some of the findings of this research were eye-opening for me because I had never been able to understand exactly why group discussion activities did not work well in ordinary English classes in my high school context. I had always thought that the main objective of group discussion activities for Japanese EFL learners was to improve English fluency, and gradually the focus can shift to developing critical thinking and facilitation skills. To be realistic, this might be too much to ask of my students in an ordinary Japanese high school teaching situation. In this research, three motivated university students whose proficiency is at or above CEFR B1 showed that they did not particularly like to discuss much more than general topics. This was a great lesson for me.

Under the latest Japanese Course of Study revisions, English education is rapidly changing. One such change is that the new elementary school MEXT-authorized textbooks that will be used from the 2024 school year will all have a QR code every two pages, and this applies to 149 textbooks over 11 subjects including English. The Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education has decided to advance the use of their own speaking test, for which tablets are used. These tests will be outsource-assessed in the Philippines, and there will be testing of speaking for all three grades every year at all Tokyo middle schools. High school teachers will soon welcome students who have experienced this curriculum with a strong focus on speaking. Given the changes noted above, more analyses of these Japanese educational changes will be needed soon. There are not many similar case studies or qualitative WTC research articles on Japanese L2 learners and teachers charged with implementing the new curriculum are ideally situated to explore what is happening through such classroom-based studies.

Based on this rare chance to observe and interview these three very different English-language students, I have learned that L2 WTC is an extremely complicated construct. In a sense, I have more questions than answers after doing this study, but I have learned valuable lessons that I am sure will improve my practice for the remainder of my career. One important thing I have learned is that the silence commonly referenced in English classes in Japan, or at least the seeming unwillingness to communicate in English even when given the opportunity, cannot be easily explained and is the result of numerous variables. These three students are so different in their learning experience and proficiency, and they have unique personalities, strengths, and weaknesses. This makes me appreciate all the more how different a class of 40 students can be in terms of their WTC in a foreign language.

The three participants each said that they felt their fluency improved after the three topic discussion classes, even in such a short period. If only three classes can make a difference, the key to fluency is to continue creating such chances to speak. Only then will our learners see some improvement, which clearly affects overall L2 WTC in a positive cycle. Regular ten-minute pair/group discussion aimed at creating WTC with carefully selected topics should be an established part of every English language class.

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Appendix A

(Translated from Japanese)

Question 1. International Posture. From 1 to 6, choose the answer that best applies to you and circle it.

1	2	3	4	5	6
not at all	not so	not much	rather yes	yes	absolutely yes

(*Negatively worded items)

1. *I try to avoid talking to foreigners if I can. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
2. I want to participate in a volunteer activity to help foreigners living in the surrounding community.
3. *I would rather stay in my hometown.
4. I am interested in an international career.
5. I sometimes feel uncomfortable with the behavior of foreigners.
6. I want to work with people who have similar ideas and values to mine.
7. I often talk about situations and events in foreign countries with my family and/or friends.
8. I have thoughts that I want to share with people from other parts of the world.
9. *I'm not much interested in overseas news.
10. I want to make friends with international students studying in Japan.
11. I wouldn't mind sharing an apartment or room with an international student.
12. I am willing to help foreigners who are in trouble at restaurants or train stations in Japan.
13. I want to work in an international organisation such as the United Nations.
14. I don't know what to say when it comes to talking to people around the world.
15. I enjoy working with people who have different customs and values.
16. I often read and watch news about foreign countries.
17. *I'd rather avoid the kind of work that sends me overseas frequently.
18. I have ideas about international issues, environmental issues and north-south issues.
19. There are many things I want to talk about with my foreign friends.
20. If would talk to an international student if there was one at school.
21. *I would feel somewhat uncomfortable if a foreigner moved next door.
22. I want to work in a foreign country.
23. *I don't think what's happening overseas has much to do with my daily life.
24. I prefer to associate with people who are similar to me rather than those with different habits and values.
25. I'm not good with people who have different customs and values.
26. I have a strong interest in international affairs.
27. I have issues to address with people in the world.
28. *I have no clear opinions about international issues.

2. WTC question items

Please assume that you are completely free to communicate or not in the following **Japanese speaking situations**. For each situation, please choose the answer that best applies to you from 1 to 6 below and circle it.

1	2	3	4	5	6
never / don't speak	rarely speak	don't speak too much	sometimes speak	speak mostly	speak always

1. When you have to make a presentation in front of a large group? (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
2. When you find your acquaintance standing before you in a line?1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
3. When you have a group discussion in a class in Japanese? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
4. When you have a chance to talk in a small group of strangers? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
5. When you are given a chance to talk freely in a class in Japanese? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
6. When you find your friend standing before you in a line? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
7. When you have a chance to talk in front of the class in Japanese in a class? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
8. When you have a discussion in a small group of friends? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

3. WTC question items

Assume that you are completely free to communicate or not in the following **English-speaking situations.** For each situation, please choose the answer that best applies to you from 1 to 6 and circle it.

1. When you have to make a presentation in front of a large group? (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
2. When you find your acquaintance standing before you in a line?1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
3. When you have a group discussion in an English class? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
4. When you have a chance to talk in a small group of strangers? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
5. When you are given a chance to talk freely in an English class? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
6. When you find your friend standing before you in a line? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
7. When you have a chance to talk in front of the class in an English class? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
8. When you have a discussion in a small group of friends? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

4. Open-ended question item

Please tell us if you feel that you have changed through the experience of speaking in English in junior high school, high school, and university classes (or on other occasions). It doesn't matter how small it is. Also, please tell us why you think such a change occurred.