

# Motivating Students Through Integrated EFL Instruction: The Case of Low-proficiency University Learners<sup>1</sup>

Taeko Kamimura

## 1. Introduction

Due to a decline in the number of births in recent years, an increasing number of Japanese universities have admitted students who would have been rejected if they had applied in the past (Yajima, 2005). Under these circumstances, Japanese universities now emphasize *shonenji kyoiku*, which means special education for first-year students and aims to foster the basic academic skills needed by students to study in their majors. In terms of English education, so-called “remedial English education” is prepared for students who have not reached the adequate English proficiency level as viewed from traditional standards.

Remedial education is designed to help these students develop their basic English skills, usually by reviewing English grammar and vocabulary items that have been covered up until high school. Different researchers and instructors conducted studies in which they designed and implemented different types of remedial/developmental education, which yielded various results. While several researchers reported positive results, such as Takeda, Ikegashira, and Saitoh (2007), who examined the effects of remedial vocabulary instruction on junior college students, others pointed out some problems, including large classroom sizes and students’ low attendance rates in remedial classes (Ueda, 2011).

The present study reports on an attempt to develop the academic English

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abilities of Japanese first-year university students with low English proficiency levels. The instruction provided for these students stressed the integration of the four English language skills in order to motivate them to study English, by familiarizing them with different uses of English in a presentation task.

## 2. Procedure

### 2.1 Subjects

Nineteen first-year Japanese university students participated in the present study. They majored in English at a four-year university in Japan. The mean score on the TOEIC® (the Test of English for International Communication) that they took at the beginning of the first semester was 327 points, and based on this score, their English proficiency was judged to be at the basic level and belong to the category of unskilled EFL learners.

The instructor of the students had a Ph.D. in English and 25 years of experience in teaching EFL and applied linguistics at a Japanese university .

### 2.2 Theoretical backgrounds of the study

The students received two months of EFL instruction. The instruction was grounded in several theories in applied linguistics, namely motivation as a learner factor, task-based instruction, performance studies, and integrated instruction.

#### 2.2.1 Presentation task

The ultimate goal of the instruction was to motivate the unskilled EFL learners to study English at the university level. Considering this goal, the students were given a task in which they were to explain their own strong points to their peers as the audience. This task was deliberately chosen for several reasons.

First and most importantly, from the perspective of learner factors, it was thought that if students were required to search for their own strong points and explain them in English to others, that would encourage them and therefore motivate

them to learn English. Several past studies have maintained that learners' lack of motivation is the most crucial psychological factor behind the decline in English ability (Ozeki, 2012a). Successful learners can be considered to be those who actively make an effort to generate and sustain motivation that is needed to select tasks to achieve their goals; in addition, successful learners try to maintain positive self-evaluation when reflecting on their past experiences and performances. This positive self-evaluation in turn leads them to generate further motivation; thus, motivation is not a static state, but a dynamic cyclical process (Dörnyei, 2005; Cohen, 2010). On the other hand, low achievers often lack positive self-evaluation, and this prevents them from generating and sustaining motivation. This process is not a productive cycle; instead, it is a vicious circle. For this reason, in this study it was first considered to try and give the students the self-confidence and positive self-evaluation that would eventually enable them to be autonomous learners (Ozeki, 2012b).

Second, the presentation task was chosen by following an instructional approach called task-based instruction, which claims that assigning an authentic task can help students find real communicative purpose in using English (Ellis, 2003). In the presentation task, the students attempted to communicate their messages by taking turns playing the roles of speaker and real audience. Such a student-centered task is often difficult to find in traditional teacher-oriented classrooms (Muranoi, 2009).

Third, a presentation task is a type of task commonly used in the field of performance studies. Nishikata (2011) maintains that it is of utmost importance for Japanese learners to practice expressing their ideas and emotions to others in English. Due to the recent economic recession in Japan, finding a job has become extremely competitive. Therefore, the task of explaining their own strong points was considered to be beneficial for the participants, who would have to write their resumes and have job interviews in the future in which they would need to advertise

themselves in interpersonal communicative contexts.

With these theoretical backgrounds, the present study reports on a pedagogical intervention aimed at raising the basic-level EFL achievers' self-confidence and thereby motivating them to learn English and become autonomous learners, by setting an authentic task in which they could try to search for their own strong points and perform a presentation in front of their peers in a persuasive manner.

### 2.2.2 Integrated instruction

In this study, the students received integrated instruction, in which four language skills—listening, reading, speaking, and writing—were taught in relation to each other.

The importance of integrated instruction has been stressed in the field of L2 writing. Several writing researchers have called for integrated writing instruction. However, these researchers were mostly concerned with academic literacy; therefore, to them, “integration” meant the connection solely between writing and reading, as the titles of their studies suggest, such as “Reading and Writing Relations: Second Language Perspectives on Research and Practice” by Grabe (2003), “Linking Literacies: Perspectives on L2 Reading-Writing Connections” by Belcher and Hirvela (2001), and *Connecting Reading and Writing in Second Language Writing Instruction* by Hirvela (2007). In a Japanese context, in order to relate literacy instruction to oral/aural instruction, Kamimura (2012) attempted a study in which integrated instruction in the four language skills was given to Japanese students who engaged in a picture book production task. The present study is another attempt, in which through integrated instruction, students attempted to practice the four language skills in performing a presentation task.

The importance of integrated instruction is now strongly asserted, especially at the secondary school level in Japan (Kogo, 2011). The new national teaching

guideline, named the “Course of Study for Junior High Schools/High Schools, Foreign Languages (English)” notified by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan” (2008 for junior high school and 2009 for high school), emphasizes the integration of the four skills in teaching English. “The Course of Study for Junior High School, Foreign Languages (English)” asserts as follows:

With regard to teaching materials, teachers should give sufficient consideration to actual language-use situations and functions of language in order to *comprehensively* cultivate communication abilities such as *listening, speaking, reading and writing* [emphasis added].

For high school English education, new subjects called “English Communication I” and “English Communication II” are taught, which are designed to develop high school students’ four English skills by following the objectives designated in “the Course of Study for High School High School, Foreign Languages (English).” “The Course of Study” sets the goal of teaching English as follows:

To develop students’ basic abilities such as accurately *understanding* and appropriately *conveying* information, ideas, etc., while fostering a positive attitude toward communication [emphasis added].

“The Course of Study” further specifies the content to be covered in reading, listening, speaking, and writing activities in “English Communication I” and “English Communication II.” It is, therefore, critical for university English education to respond to such a shift in emphasis on integrated instruction in English at the secondary school level.

In the present study, reading and listening activities were prepared to give the students sufficient amount of input. Much care was taken to provide the students

with comprehensible input which was relevant to them in both the spoken and written modes (Muranoi, 2009). Speaking and writing activities were designed to give them opportunities to produce comprehensible output (Swain, 1985) in a presentation task where they were expected to deliver speeches comprehensible enough to be understood by their peers as the audience.

### 3. Activities in the integrated instruction

This section explains the content of the actual activities used in the present study.

#### 3.1 Stage 1: Reading

The task assigned to the students was to give a presentation where they would explain their own strong points to their peers as the audience. At the first stage, the students were told to engage in a reading activity in which they had to read the passage shown below; this was used as a model which the students could refer to when composing their own drafts as a writing activity in the next stage.

#### **Passage 1**

#### **About Myself**

Hello, everyone. What kind of person do you think I am? Today I would like to introduce myself. I have two strong points.

First, I am an independent person. I try to do things without relying on others. For example, when I was a high school student, I had an e-mail friend who lived in Calgary in Canada. When I became a university student, I decided to meet her in Canada. I worked part-time at a restaurant and saved enough money to go to Canada. I was afraid of going abroad alone, but finally I went to Canada to meet her. I talked to her in English face-to-face for the first time.

Second, I have a broad outlook on life and the world. I am interested in the various lifestyles of people in different cultures. I have been to Canada, America, Australia, Korea, and Britain. When I visited these countries, I closely watched how people there ate, dressed, and lived. By doing so, I always learned new ways of life, and at the same time I relearned Japanese culture from an outsider's point of view.

In conclusion, I am an independent person with a broad perspective on life and the world. I would like to know more about myself and discover my possibilities. Thank you.

In this reading activity, the students were instructed to pay attention to several points, including the structure of the English essay and paragraph organization. They were then given Sheet 1, which graphically illustrated the organization of English essays (see Figure 1), and were told that the English essay consists of three parts. Specifically, they learned the following points which are usually covered by academic ESL/EFL writing textbooks (e.g., Oshima & Hogue, 1997; Oi, Kamimura, & Sano, 2011). The introductory paragraph generally provides background information and always presents a main idea in a thesis statement. The body paragraphs develop the main idea, and the concluding paragraph restates the thesis statement and is sometimes followed by a final thought. Each paragraph is further composed of a topic sentence and supporting sentences. The topic sentences in the body paragraphs substantiate the main assertion presented in the thesis statement, and the supporting sentences further develop the topic sentences by the use of facts and examples as supporting details. The abstraction level is highest in the thesis statement, and lowest in the supporting details.

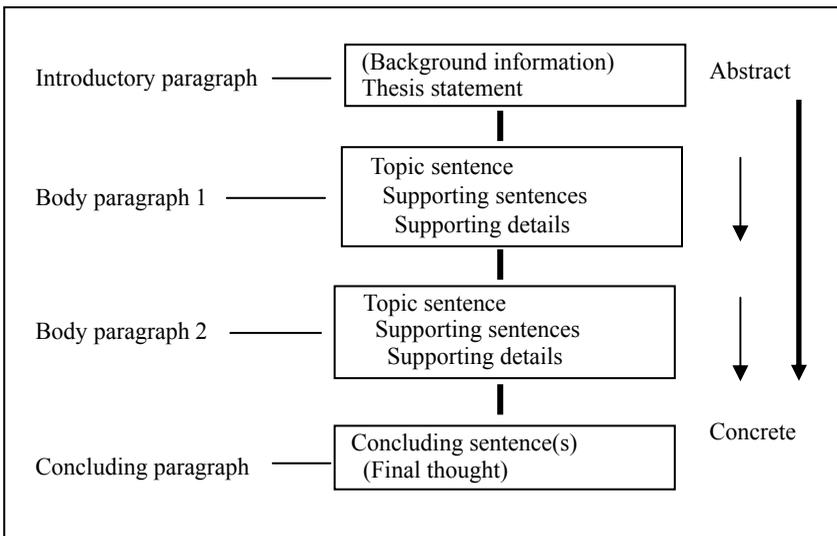


Figure 1. Organization of the English essay.

Next, the instructor distributed Sheet 2, an outline prepared for the students to analyze the passage. Sheet 2 is shown in Appendix A. A possible complete outline is shown in Figure 2. Through this activity the students learned not only the content but also the form of the reading passage.

**Outline of Passage 1**

**I. Introductory paragraph**

**A. Background information:** What kind person do you think I am?

**B. Thesis statement:** I have two strong points.

**II. Body paragraphs**

**A. Body paragraph 1**

**1. Topic sentence:** I am an independent person.

**a. Supporting sentence:** I try to do things without relying on others.

**i. Supporting details:** I earned enough money on my own to meet an e-mail friend in Calgary in Canada.

**B. Body paragraph 2**

**1. Topic sentence:** I have a broad outlook on life and the world.

**a. Supporting sentence:** I am interested in the various lifestyles of people in different cultures.

**i. Supporting details:** I visited various foreign countries such as Canada, America, Australia, Korea, and Britain, and by watching how people in these countries ate, dressed, and lived, I always learned new ways of life. At the same time I relearned Japanese culture from an outsider's point of view.

**III. Concluding paragraph**

**A. Concluding sentence:** I am an independent person with a broad perspective on life and the world.

**B. Final thought:** I would like to know more about myself and discover my possibilities.

*Figure 2.* Outline of Passage 1.

Several writing studies have pointed out that personal anecdotes should be avoided in English argumentative essays because they create the quality of subjectivity (Isogai, 1998; Kamimura & Oi, 2006; Kamimura, 2012). In the present

study, however, the use of personal experiences was intentionally encouraged. The task prepared for the students in the next Stage 2 required them to explain their own strong points. In this kind of task, referring to personal experiences was considered to function as a persuasive appeal to the audience. Furthermore, it was hoped that the students would gain self-confidence by looking back at their own pasts and finding a positive self-image in their accomplishments.

### 3.2 Stage 2: Writing

Through the reading activity, the students learned what kind of messages they would need to include in their drafts and how the draft should be organized. Based on this knowledge, at the second stage they engaged in a writing activity, in which they composed drafts for a presentation contest. The students were first given Sheet 2 (outline) as an aid for brainstorming, upon which they were told to write their ideas. Referring to this outline, they composed a first draft. Peer editing was not adopted because an oral presentation contest was scheduled, and it was therefore considered to be desirable for the students not to know the content of each other's speech drafts. The students revised and produced multiple drafts until they completed a final speech draft.

### 3.3 Stage 3: Speaking and listening

As a speaking and listening activity, a presentation contest was held. Each student gave an oral presentation as a speaker, and the rest of the students listened to it as listeners. In order to enhance the audience's understanding of the speakers' messages, students were told to prepare presentation slides by using a presentation software package (such as Microsoft PowerPoint). Before the contest was held, the students were given Sheet 3, "Evaluation Sheet," as is shown in Appendix B. Following Kamimura (2012), the evaluation sheet contained the following five criteria:

- (1) Was the content of the speech persuasive?
- (2) Were the facts and examples used in the speech effective?
- (3) Did the speaker speak with appropriate English pronunciation and intonation?
- (4) Did the speaker use slides effectively?
- (5) Did the speaker memorize his/her draft and maintain eye contact with the audience?

As speakers, the students were told to focus on those criteria when they delivered their speech. As listeners, they were asked to rate each student's speech according to these five criteria on a six-point scale, with six being the highest and one being the lowest. They also wrote comments about their peers' speeches—specifically what they thought was particularly effective and what they wished to suggest for further revision and improvement.

### 3.4 Stage 4: Writing and wrapping-up

After the contest, the evaluation scores were calculated. A week later, the three students who obtained the highest scores were honored with best speaker awards. All the students submitted final written drafts of their speeches.

## 4. Sample manuscript

This section discusses a sample writing produced as a speech manuscript. Sample 1 is the draft written by Student A, who won first prize in the presentation contest. The sample is displayed with all the errors left intact.

Sample 1 is well-organized and as seen, uses the three-part structure: introductory, body, and concluding paragraphs. The main idea—that he has two strong points—is claimed in the thesis statement. This main idea is developed in the following two body paragraphs, each of which explains one of his strong points with the effective use of concrete examples as supporting details. In the first body paragraph, he insists that he is a person who accomplishes what he has decided once

he decides it. He uses the example of when he worked two part-time jobs in order to earn enough money to buy a character costume he had found at an auction sale. In the second body paragraph, he argues that he is a considerate person who takes good care of his pets. Here he introduces his pet hamster, adding a detailed explanation about how he cared for it. He concludes by restating that he is a person of strong will, and says that he will keep his strong will in the future. Although several errors are found in Sample 1, it was worth the prize both in terms of content and form.

### **Sample 1**

Hello everyone! What kind of person do you think I am? Today I would like to introduce myself. I have two strong points.

First, I am a person who carries out what I have decided once. For example, one day I wanted to buy a character costume which cost forty-five thousand yen at auction. I decided to earn money in order to buy it. But because it was auction's article, I had to earn money for short period. I couldn't achieve it by having only one part-time job because of the labor standard law. So I worked at two different places one day, for five hours at each place. After one and a half month, I earned forty-five thousand yen and finally could get the character costume. I had only four days before the closing of the auction. It was very hard!

Second, I am a person who is busy taking care of animals. I have one hamster. His name is Nyoshi nyoshi. He is my partner. If we have pets, we have to keep them in a narrow place. It is a pity for pets. So I wanted to provide him with several kinds of foods. I give him about thirty kinds of foods in total. For example, green beans, dried small sardines, dried eggs, dried potatoes, dried sweet potatoes, dried pumpkins, sun flower seeds, peanuts, almonds, yogurt snacks, dried strawberries, dried pineapples, etc. I haven't forgotten to clean his house. I always clean his house before I go to bed. Once I decide to cherish him, I take care of him until the end.

In conclusion, I am a person who persists in my own will. I always achieve what I decided. I will do so forever! Thank you.

The student A also showed the largest number of slides in the presentation. He used several photos he took himself, for example, a photo in which he was wearing the character costume he bought and one in which he was feeding his hamster. He delivered his speech while displaying these slides effectively and succeeded in attracting the attention of his peers, who eagerly listened to his speech

and attentively watched the accompanying slides.

## 5. Conclusion

This study reports on an attempt to motivate Japanese EFL university students with a basic level of English proficiency through integrated instruction. For this purpose, a presentation task was chosen. The instruction comprised of five stages, each of which focused on different language skills, covering reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. The instruction seemed to have had a positive effect on the students. Due to the limited time schedule, a questionnaire to assess the effects of the instruction could not be administered in class. However, compositions written by the students as answers to a final exam question at the end of their first academic year revealed their eagerness to continue to study English. In this question, the students were told to write about what their goals in their university life were and how they would try to accomplish them. Although the question simply asked them about “their goals in university life,” rather than “their goals related to studying English at university,” 16 out of 20 students, or 80% of the students, wrote their goals as somehow relating to studying English. The following Sample 2, produced by Student B, is one example of the compositions.

### **Sample 2**

I want to go America in a school program. I'm interested in foreign countries and another people, culture, language. The reason why I select America, I went to Guam two times when I was child. So I would like to another city in America. Another reason is I want to speak English fluently. I should do many things to go to America. First, I must study English more. I think my skills need English words more. So I have to remember 10 words in a day. Second, I must take the TOEFL TEST. If I don't take 430 points, I can't go to America. I have to study English due to go to America. I'll study English with ABC university teachers in ABC University at March. ABC University have TOEFL programs. I'll take part in the program. I hope my skill will be better than before I take part in the program. I have to do many things. I want to go America in a school program. I'll do my best!!

As seen in Sample 2, Student B maintains that she hopes to go to America because she wants to visit an American city and because she wants to speak English fluently. She notes that to reach her goal, she will memorize ten English words a day and also study for the TOEFL in a special program prepared at her university.

The other students also mentioned that their goals in university life were to study English harder, although their reasons varied: some students wished to be English teachers, while others wanted to have international friends. To achieve their goals, the students noted that they would write a diary in English, read English books, or watch English movies.

As these compositions reveal, it was found that through the integrated instruction, the students in the present study grew as motivated, autonomous learners of English. They succeeded in setting learning goals on their own and finding ways to achieve them. This result offers several pedagogical implications. First, learners of English at the basic level tend to lack motivation and self-confidence; therefore, the first thing that teachers need to do is to search for ways to motivate them. Care should be taken to design tasks to which the students can relate and in which they can make use of their own experiences. The presentation task used in this study is an example of such a task. Second, integrated instruction is effective to motivate students whose English proficiency is limited. Through integrated instruction students can gain opportunities both to receive input and to produce output in English, thereby developing their receptive (reading and listening) as well as productive skills (writing and speaking).

This study has several limitations. The number of participants was limited, and only the presentation task was prepared in the present study. A questionnaire was not used to assess the students' reactions to the integrated instruction. To confirm the present results, future studies that involve a larger number of participants, employ different types of tasks, and systematically examine the effects of integrated instruction are certainly warranted.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Outline of Your Draft**

#### I. Introductory paragraph

A. Background information:

B. Thesis statement:

#### II. Body paragraphs

A. Body paragraph 1

1. Topic sentence:

a. Supporting sentence:

i. Supporting details:

B. Body paragraph 2

1. Topic sentence:

a. Supporting sentence:

i. Supporting details:

#### III. Concluding paragraph

A. Concluding sentence:

B. Final thought:

## Appendix B

### Presentation Evaluation Sheet

Poor ←————→ Excellent

1.	Was the content of the speech persuasive?	1	2	3	4	5	6
2.	Were the facts and examples used in the speech effective?	1	2	3	4	5	6
3.	Did the speaker speak with appropriate English pronunciation and intonation?	1	2	3	4	5	6
4.	Did the speaker use slides effectively?	1	2	3	4	5	6
5.	Did the speaker memorize his/her draft and maintain eye contact with the audience?	1	2	3	4	5	6

Good points:

Suggestions: