

1. Introduction

According to the 2023 National Assessment of Academic Ability, the correct answer rate for the English “speaking” section among junior high school students was only 12.4%. This shows that many Japanese students have difficulty expressing their thoughts and feelings in English. In this globalizing world, we believe it is essential for students to have enough English speaking skills to communicate with foreigners in English.

2. Purpose

One reason for this difficulty may be the psychological barrier to speaking in English. In this research, we would like to find out whether students can build confidence and do away with the psychological barrier, if they have successful experiences speaking in English.

3. Research Question

What kinds of successful English speaking experiences help lower the psychological barrier?

4. Previous Studies

1. Historical Background

Improving Japan by adopting foreign cultures → focused on reception (reading) → not as strong at expressing or sharing information

2. Current Research Findings

The world is globalizing → we should express our ideas clearly

- Results of a national survey
- Answers on a questionnaire in our high school

→ many people feel anxious about not being able to make themselves understood

3. Methods professionals used to improve students’ English speaking skills and confidence

- Practicing short English conversations
- Talking with foreigners

→ The participants’ test scores increased.

→ These activities must have achieved successful interactive experiences which improved the students’ speaking abilities.

5. Investigation

Method: interviews and surveys

Who: High school and university students who volunteered to guide foreign tourists around Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima.

Why: ① To find out what the participants had expected from the activity before participating and ② to learn what kind of successful experiences they had which they believe improved their English skills and encouraged them to engage more actively in conversations.

6. Research①

【Questionnaire】

Participants

11 high school students who joined the activity once or twice

Questions

Q1. Participants’ self-evaluation of their speaking ability on a five point scale (before and after participation)

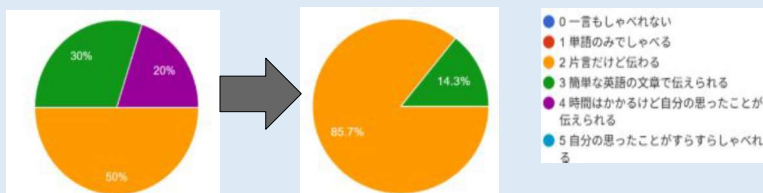
Q2. Anxieties before participation (before participation)

Q3. Whether participants think their speaking ability will improve or has improved (before and after participation)

Results

Q1. Changes in self-evaluation of their speaking ability

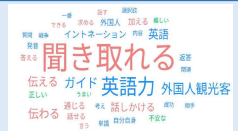
More students answered that they could speak only a few words.



Q2. Anxieties before participation

Many students expressed anxiety about their English speaking ability.

→ more concerned about their listening ability



Q3: Changes in reasons for improving English speaking skills

Before→ They could learn new expressions and vocabulary from the foreigners.

After→ The volunteer activity gave them chances to use the English that they had already learned in school.

7. Research②

【Interview】

Participants

7 high school and university students who have joined the activity more than 5 times.

Questions

Q1. What concrete successful experiences did you have during the activity?

Q2. Do you think your English speaking ability will improve?

Results

Q1

• Being able to use the casual English knowledge that they had already learned. Ex. Saying “Makes sense.” instead of “I understand.”

• Being able to carry on conversations with tourists

Q2

• All seven students answered “Yes.”

Some students also said they experienced difficulties such as being at a loss for words, feeling awkward in silence and not being able to understand what the tourists said.

8. Discussion

【Self evaluation】

Self-evaluation leads to confidence in speaking English, so we thought their self-evaluation would improve after the activity. However, in fact, many students expressed their lack of speaking fluency, so we assume they experienced some kind of difficulty. Volunteering once or twice may not be enough to gain confidence, since they still lack sufficient communication experiences.

【What is necessary to improve English speaking skills】

Before joining the activity, many students expected to learn new vocabulary from foreigners. After the activity, however, they learned that using expressions that they already knew improved their speaking rather than learning new words. This means that they realized actual practice is more important than gaining English knowledge.

【Successful experiences】

Experienced students shared successful experiences such as being able to carry on engaging conversations with foreigners without unnatural pauses. They also shared their difficulties such as being at a loss for words. Despite these difficulties, they kept trying to continue their conversations, listening to what other guides were saying during the activity. Considering the students who joined the activity once or twice only highlighted their difficulties, it is obvious that students need to have these kinds of experiences multiple times in order to feel more confident in speaking English.

9. Future Research

To improve one’s English speaking skills, it is important to join these kinds of activities continuously, namely, situations where students can talk with foreigners. We would like to figure out what can motivate them to join such activities more frequently.

10. Reference

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