

# Culturally informed oral participation and corrective feedback practices for Japanese EFL students — Results and discussion

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This article explores the results, data analysis, and discussion from an action research project in an intermediate Conversation class of Japanese EFL students. The project observes corrective feedback and U.S. oral participation classroom norms, exploring the viability of a speaking activity, “Small Talk”, to promote extensive speaking practice. A previous article explained the research perspectives and methodology behind this project; this article will discuss the results, examining how students found “Small Talk” challenging but productive.

## **Introduction**

When working with a Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) student population, teachers should adopt culturally informed practices that will maximize student participation and learning outcomes. The previous article explored how teacher-student expectations can differ within a multicultural classroom, often leading to conflict; however, “Small Talk” is suggested as a helpful activity, as it allows for English teachers to require extensive speaking while allowing students to speak in a safe, supported environment. This article will discuss the results of a teacher interview and the results of a student survey, both about “Small Talk”. The survey was taken at the end of the semester, and suggests that while the students found extensive speaking and U.S. norms of active participation uncomfortable, they agreed that their English skills benefited and they recommend this activity for future Japanese EFL students.

## **“Small Talk”**

To review, “Small Talk” is an extensive speaking activity that seems able to achieve a compromise between Japanese student concerns about potential loss of face with peers and a teacher’s need to offer speaking practice and corrective feedback (CF) to students.

“Small Talk” sequences fluency and accuracy practice and provides delayed CF. Created by Ron Harris, and further developed by the English Language Center teachers at Gonzaga University, “Small Talk” is a student-led activity. The activity takes place in four parts. First, a group of students prepare a

presentation for their class, including a video, useful vocabulary, a summary, and thoughtful WH-discussion questions. Next, the class prepares a conversation card for homework in response to the discussion questions; this card allows students to organize their ideas, look up new words, and write their own follow-up questions before engaging in the conversation. In the next class, the group opens a 10-minute small-group conversation, later asking students to do a reflection activity in which they share highlights from the conversation and assess their participation and English. During the conversations the teacher does not intervene, instead walking around to note errors being made. After the class, the teacher compiles an error worksheet on Comsem.net (a website designed for this purpose) which students self-correct as homework.

The structure of this activity allows for students to participate in a scaffolded, supported, and independent way. Students can engage in a leadership role, with the teacher providing CF only afterwards, in order to avoid interrupting and to simulate a real-life conversation in which students might one day engage in outside of the classroom.

### **Research questions**

A pilot study was conducted in a practicum class to observe both teacher and student perspectives on oral participation. As explained previously, the setting was a U.S. satellite campus for a private women's Japanese university. There were twelve students in this intermediate-level Conversation class. The lead teacher, Shannon (pseudonym), has extensive experience working with both ESL and EFL students. Data collection came from classroom observations, an initial hour-long interview with Shannon, and a final, anonymous 26-question student survey. Nine out of twelve students responded to the survey. Consent to share responses was given by all participants.

The research questions in this study were:

1. What types of oral CF did Shannon prefer to use in class? Why?
2. How did she gauge her student's receptiveness to CF?
3. Which CF methods did she find that Japanese students were most responsive to?
4. How did our students experience her CF methods?
5. How did our students experience U.S. classroom oral participation expectations?
6. To what extent were they conscious of a difference between Japanese and U.S. teaching styles and/or their own adjustments in student behavior?

### **Data Analysis**

The data was triangulated with three sources: a literature review, a teacher interview, and a student survey. Initial research was used to create interview questions for Shannon, such as "What types of CF do you prefer to use in your classes? Why? Do you have any you prefer to not use or limit use of?" (drawn from Lyster & Ranta, 1997), "Do you think there is a certain type of CF that Japanese students are more or less responsive to?" (drawn from Yoshida, 2010), and "Do you believe silence can be considered as uptake?" (drawn from Sasaki, Yusuke, & Ortlieb, 2017).

From the 1.5-hour interview, 10 minutes were transcribed (Shannon, personal communication, 2021). These ten minutes specifically discussed student behaviors that indicated comfort in class. It was coded and sorted using grounded analysis into the following categories: error correction (individualization, ESL/EFL settings), comfort levels (high, low) and teacher strategies (teacher CF methods, gauging comfort, building a safe classroom). After multiple revisions to the transcription codes and categories, the overall theme of the interview was identified as “individualized response to student needs”. As the interview transcript reveals, Shannon is a) dedicated to asking for student feedback, and b) sensitive to adjusting her methods to her students. She does not rely on one method of CF for all classrooms, but rather adjusts her strategies to each group.

After the interview was conducted, a student survey was written to explore the student perspective of Shannon's strategies, including the student views of “Small Talk” and our classroom participation expectations.

The student surveys were analyzed *a priori*, using the same questions and categories from the teacher interview. How teacher perceptions of CF and cultural methods aligned or contrasted with student perceptions was analyzed. By triangulating the data like this, teacher and student views in the class were compared to each other; in addition, the external validity of this study was investigated by comparing the results to the data other researchers had found previously.

## Findings and Discussion

### Interview category 1: Error correction

In response to “1. What types of oral CF did Shannon prefer to use in class? Why?”, the instructor largely prefers delayed CF to immediate CF. When she uses immediate feedback, she prefers elicitation (supported by gestures and/or metalanguage) to address accuracy errors that require student-generated repair. She explained her preference for these methods: *“If we can get them to repeat what we’ve said or to make some kind of indication of ‘I recognize that this is a correction and not a shadow’, and if we’re systematic, then there will be more uptake.”* She also supports peer-correction in her classrooms by marking when it happens and encouraging it. Her preference for direct feedback requiring student-generated repair is supported by the literature, as studies have shown it results in higher rates of uptake and participation (e.g. Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Hedge, 2000, Ferris, 2006).

While she occasionally uses immediate CF, similar to the views of some researchers described previously, she argues that skill in an L2 requires not just improving accuracy, but also fluency and complexity. She believes that in order to develop the latter, students need opportunities to speak uninterruptedly; immediate CF can hinder language production if students become distracted by monitoring their English. In addition, what a teacher spends time correcting in class communicates what is important to them. She said, *“The other challenge we have is that we’re saying to students ‘Your message is not as important to me as your accuracy.’”* She wants students to be able to focus on both and facilitates this by providing a range of activities geared towards different communicative skills.

She explained that as she progressed in her teaching career, she began to prefer delayed feedback

much more than immediate. While there is still little evidence to promote either method as superior, she believes delayed feedback allows for fluency and complexity development during extended speaking activities, while still addressing accuracy errors intentionally and explicitly later. She explained: *“I think we do our students a disservice because if we’re talking about something important, then we should separate fluency and accuracy, and then that’s the point where delayed CF closes the loop. If you only have fluency, then yes, they get to practice, but when they’re done, they don’t come away with anything.”*

Specifically, she prefers to give CF through Comsem.net worksheets after a “Small Talk” discussion. Shannon explained the advantages of delayed feedback in “Small Talk”. First, it allows for uninterrupted speech. Second, because teachers silently observe, it requires students to rely on conversation strategies, like circumlocution, to communicate. This independence benefits students because, *“If we’re solving their problems for them, they will always turn to us.”* Third, after practicing fluency, the worksheets allow for accuracy building.

Shannon’s dedication to adjusting her methods for each student group can be seen in “Small Talk”, as she adjusts the worksheets for each unique classroom environment. She described: *“When the Japanese students were...in an ESL multilingual environment, they did worksheets just like everybody else. When I came to [the Japanese satellite campus], I switched it – I didn’t put their names on it at all, and there was just number one through ten, and everybody had to correct all of them.”*

This change addresses two important factors in individualizing CF to her students. First, the ESL Japanese students were not asked to complete all the sentences because some included grammatical errors that Japanese speakers did not struggle with in English, but for example, the Spanish or Arabic speakers did. When coming to the monolingual Japanese satellite campus environment, she asked students to complete all errors because they struggled with similar mistakes. Second, she anticipated different comfort levels between the two student populations. She explained the Japanese EFL students tended to act differently than the ESL students. *“Theoretically [our satellite campus] is ESL, but it’s actually EFL... if you have experience with Japanese students in a multilingual environment in the United States, there is a difference between those students and the students you will encounter in an EFL environment, because the students that choose to come to a multilingual environment are the ones ready and willing to take risks. So, they really are a different kind of student.”* This observation in differing student behavior by English language environment is supported by other research studies such as Saito & Ebsworth (2004) and Sasaki, Yusuke, & Ortlieb (2017).

She anonymized errors at the Japanese satellite campus with the goal of decreasing self-consciousness. However, she again adjusted her methods once she discovered some classrooms did not express the embarrassment she had seen before.

## **Interview category 2: Comfort levels**

In response to “2. How did she gauge her student’s receptiveness to CF?”, Shannon identified several behaviors which can indicate high or low comfort levels that she uses to inform her CF strategies.

Shannon mentioned body language as being highly important when reading student comfort levels.

However, it takes cultural awareness to interpret cues that might be uncommon in the teacher's own culture. She mentioned two body language cues:

1. *"There's this consensus-gathering gesture in Japan that you will become very used to: to hear a question and you immediately look to your left, and you'll do a little nod, and then you'll look to your right, and a little nod. What it means is, 'Do we all agree on this, is it okay if I speak, and I will speak.' The length of the consensus gathering can tell you how comfortable they are. Some actually very fluent, very comfortable-seeming students will do that, but it's a quick thing and then they answer."*
2. *"It's the inability to look at you. Well, looking towards you, looking around you, looking above you, because I think they know that this is something that the American culture does, but just sitting there, how comfortable they look."*

Shannon explained that she reads body language (like these two examples) to gauge her student comfort levels in class. Then, she adapts her CF methods accordingly. However, in the practicum class, it was difficult to observe these behaviors because of the Zoom setting because it is difficult to track student's eyes during an online class. She mentioned struggling with this limitation.

In Japanese EFL classes with high comfort levels, she has transitioned the CF worksheets from anonymous to identified with student initials during the semester. She first considered it when students began to self-identify their own errors publicly. Hearing their voluntary identification, she asked if they would be willing to have their initials put on the sentences; students agreed, and she changed the worksheets for this class. This is a prime example of adaptation; she started with initial ideas about this student population based on a previous EFL class, took the time to check her assumption, found it incorrect with this specific EFL group, and readjusted her methods.

However, some EFL classes do have lower comfort levels, and she keeps the sentences anonymous. For example, she explained some classes have "mean girls", who will target painfully shy students, resulting in absenteeism and tense dynamics. In these situations, she is very careful about publicly identifying errors, whether in immediate or delayed CF. The conversation class observed for this pilot study is another example of an EFL group that preferred an anonymous format. Consensus-gathering is already challenging in class, potentially because the students are unable to read each other on Zoom the same way as they could in person; when she asked the students if they preferred named or anonymous worksheets, there was an extended period of silence. She then invited them to text her their vote, and the class asked for anonymous worksheets, which were maintained throughout the semester.

### **Interview category 3: Teacher strategies**

In response to "3. Which CF methods did she find that Japanese students were most responsive to?", the instructor explained a variety of methods she uses depending on each unique class. They are listed below by categories:

Teacher CF methods

- Chooses formality level of CF based on student motivations (e.g. fun game for CF in conversation)

school, more formal sentence correction for exam preparation course)

- Has students listen to their own recordings, asks them to self-identify errors
- Uses elicitation and metalinguistic feedback to increase chances of uptake

#### Gauging comfort levels

- Asks students if they prefer the worksheets to be anonymous or identified
- Investigates previous student experiences with public correction – recognizes that the Ministry of Education in Japan is switching to a more conversational curriculum, increasing the possibility of exposure to public correction
- Notes which students participate voluntarily, will ask them to answer first to model for less comfortable students

#### Building a safe classroom

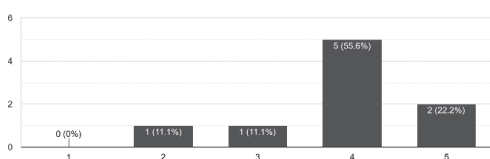
- Focuses initially on getting students comfortable speaking
- Introduces CF worksheets later in the semester once students are more relaxed
- Allows students to correct the error worksheets collaboratively with peers
- Adjusts publicness of CF depending on classroom dynamics and student comfort levels

### Student survey results

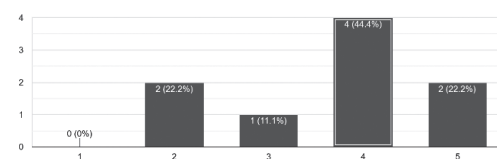
After the interview about Shannon’s methods, a student survey was created to answer, “4. How did the students experience her CF methods?” from the student perspective.

In general, the nine Conversation students that took the survey liked “Small Talk”. The chart below shows the majority of students ranked “Small Talk” as a 4 on a 1 to 5 Likert scale, with the average response being 3.89. Next, students responded to questions about specific aspects of “Small Talk”, such as being the leader (average 3.67), the conversation topics (average 4.22), and having their errors written down (average 4.56).

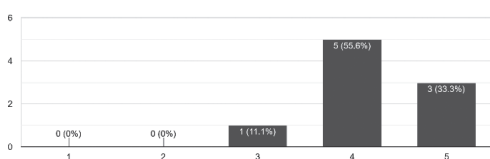
How do you feel about Small Talk?  
9 responses



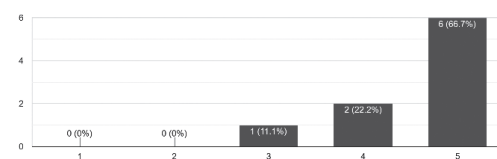
How do you feel about being the leader?  
9 responses



How do you feel about the conversation topics?  
9 responses



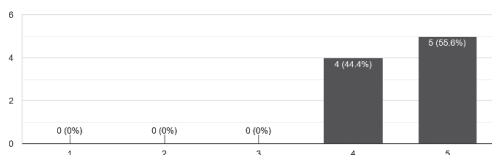
How do you feel when your teacher writes down your mistakes in Small Talk?  
9 responses



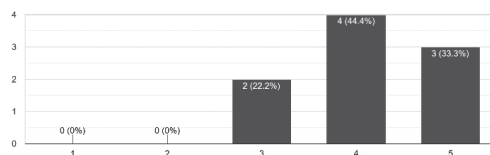
The question that received the most positive response was, “Has Small Talk helped to improve your English speaking?” with an average score of 4.78.

The next section included questions about Comsem.net, the website hosting the error correction worksheets. The students reported benefiting from seeing and correcting their errors (average 4.56), and one student wrote, *“I can find my error. I like comsem. If I understand our mistakes, our skill improve”*. Students perceived teacher reformulations as accurate (average 4.1) but reported lower rates of using the reformulations in future conversations (average 3.89). Students voted unanimously that future classes should continue to participate in this activity.

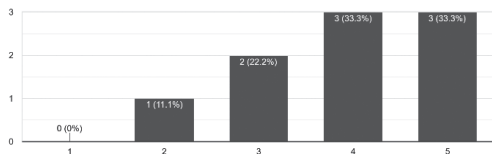
Does it help your English to see your mistakes and correct them on Comsem.net?  
9 responses



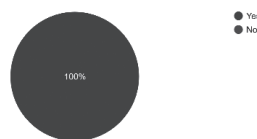
Were the teacher corrections on the worksheet accurate? (Was it what you wanted to say?)  
9 responses



Do you try to use the teacher's corrections in new conversations?  
9 responses

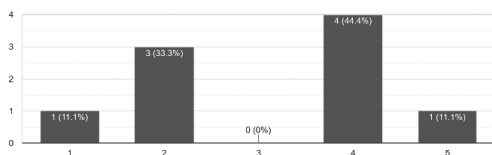


Next year, do you think the students in Conversation class should do Small Talk?  
9 responses

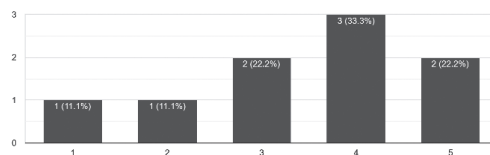


In the second section, the survey addressed, “5. How did the students experience U.S. classroom oral participation expectations?” The survey questions asked about expectations reported by Japanese international students in previous studies as uncomfortable, including speaking in whole group settings (average 3.11), sharing ideas and opinions (average 3.44), and receiving CF in class (average 4.11). From classroom observations, it became clear that Shannon expects there to be a quick student response time, so this expectation was added to the survey. Verbal student contributions are viewed as interruptive in many Japanese classrooms (Sasaki & Ortlieb, 2017), which could explain why the Conversation students reported some discomfort providing answers quickly in the classroom (average 3.11).

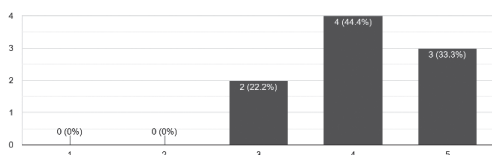
How do you feel when asked to speak in front of everyone in your U.S. classes?  
9 responses



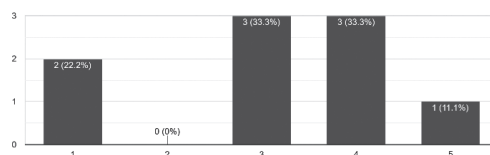
How do you feel when asked to share your ideas and opinions in your U.S. classes?  
9 responses



How do you feel when your English is corrected in your U.S. classes?  
9 responses

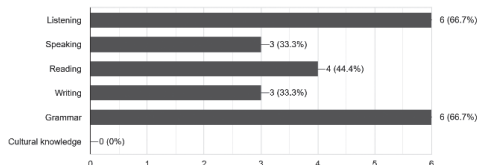


How do you feel when asked to answer quickly in your U.S. classes?  
9 responses

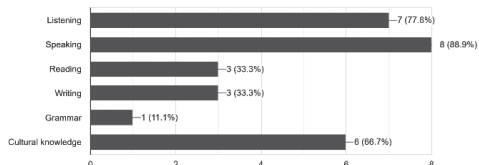


Finally, the remaining survey questions focused on, “6. To what extent were they conscious of a difference between Japanese and U.S. teaching styles and/or their own adjustments in student behavior?” To contrast teaching priorities, students were asked to identify the foundational skills practiced most in their English classes. Students reported that both Japanese and American teachers spent considerable time developing listening skills; however, Japanese teachers were reported as also focusing on grammar and not on cultural knowledge, while American teachers received the opposite vote.

What skills do you practice most in your English classes with Japanese teachers? (You can check multiple).  
9 responses



What skills do you practice most in your English classes with American teachers? (You can check multiple).  
9 responses



In the open response section, teacher behaviors were compared. For the differences between Japanese and U.S. English teachers, a common response was about the quantity of class time dedicated to student oral participation. Eight out of nine responses commented on this difference, writing comments like, “*Japanese teacher thinks grammar is the most important, but American teacher thinks speaking is the most important,*” “*There are many opportunities for students to speak English with classmates or teacher in a class with an American teacher,*” and “*Many of the classes given by Japanese teachers are just listening lectures.*” Other comments contrasted how teachers responded to errors (“*English teacher permit our mistake*”), used the L1 (“*The difference is American teachers speak all and only English, but most Japanese teachers speak Japanese*”), and other classroom norms such as volunteering answers (“*Japanese teacher don’t require volunteers*”) and honorifics (“*how to call the teacher*”).

For similarities between teachers, kindness was most frequently mentioned. Three students mentioned this; for example, “*They anxious about us. They are kind to answer questions*”. Other similarities included the use of listening activities, group work, and homework quantity.

To approach awareness of teaching styles and expectations through another lens, students were asked to fill in the blanks with sentences about expectations. For example, Question 17 asked, “Fill in the blank: With Japanese teachers, students are expected to \_\_\_\_\_ in English classes.” Students generally focused on teacher’s expectations for them to improve their language skills (“*improve*”, “*understand about English*”, “*speak English skills*”) for both Japanese and American teachers alike; about half of the responses mentioned this. Comparisons that showed more of a dichotomy included responses from Student 2 (“*get high score – speak fluently*”), Student 6 (“*boring*” – “*fun*”), and Student 9 (“*attend*” – “*volunteer to answer*”), with the student expectation from Japanese teachers expressed first and Americans second in parentheses.

To learn about the second part of question #6, “To what extent were they conscious of...their own adjustments in student behavior?”, students were asked question 25, “When in class with an American teacher, do you change your behavior as a student? If yes, why? How? If no, why not?” Eight out of nine



students responded with an affirmative answer. Some were more general, like *“American teacher is freedom”* and *“Yes. It is because I’m nervous in class”*, but most were in response to specific norms Shannon had taught explicitly in the Conversation class where this pilot study took place. For example, she taught them conversation strategies like active listening, and Student 2 mentioned this skill (*“Yes. I react with listening noises”*). Three students mentioned actively sharing opinions as a change in behavior (*“I’m going to speak volunteering”*, *“Yes, because it’s important to speak a lot and give opinions, and I think I should react”*). Student 6 wrote a longer response about how her self-image had been impacted by her study abroad experience, explaining *“Yes!!!!!! I have grown very much by studying abroad online. Until now, I haven’t given my answers or opinions in front of everyone in class, but now I can. You can’t speak English without speaking. It was a period when I was confident in myself.”*

### **Interview and survey comparison**

The results of the student survey largely support “Small Talk” as an effective method well-received by the Japanese students in this pilot study. They also express some level of discomfort with the same classroom expectations identified in previous research studies.

In the interview, Shannon expressed a dedication to individualizing CF methods for each student group. The survey results support her assertion that “Small Talk” and Comsem.net are an effective learning tool for this pilot study of Japanese EFL students, as everyone voted the next class should participate in “Small Talk”. In addition, most responded that “Small Talk” had improved their English (average 4.78). The lower responses to aspects of “Small Talk” can be interpreted with an awareness of Japanese classroom expectations. Most classes do not require students to take an active participative role; being the leader in “Small Talk” had an average response of 3.67, contributing to the lower overall rating of the activity (3.67). However, students responded very positively to the CF aspect of “Small Talk”, including having their errors recorded (average 4.56) and seeing and correcting them on Comsem.net (average 4.56).

Many studies on CF in classroom settings record the frequency of teacher methods but struggle to link CF to actual language acquisition, as it is quite difficult to measure. To gain some insight on student perspective of their own language growth, Question #10 asked if students tried to use teacher corrections in new conversations. On average, the response to this question was 3.89, which is still high, but slightly weaker than other scores to CF questions. In a future study, choosing certain structures from the initial worksheets to track in later “Small Talk” discussions could provide insight into second language acquisition; are students self-correcting or avoiding previous errors they had made?

Of the expectations in a U.S. class, CF was the most positively received (average 4.11). Other norms such as sharing opinions in front of peers received lower responses (in the 3s). This could explain why even though Shannon frequently repeated her expectations of oral participation, the students still did not readily offer their ideas. During classroom observations, she resorted to private text messages via “LINE” or small group (“Breakout Rooms”) discussions before being able to receive a student response. It seems that while some students were slowly becoming more willing to share their ideas, the teacher wait time sometimes did not accommodate for the length of time it took them to respond. Often, they sat in permanent

silence and stared at Shannon after she had asked a question, requiring her to reformulate, give an example, or call on a student in order to gain a response.

However, sometimes students missed the opportunity to share by waiting too long to speak. For example, some students would “unmute”, a behavior on Zoom conferencing that indicates an intention to speak, but Shannon would start talking, the student would mute again, and the moment would pass. It is possible that the U.S. norm of offering answers and opinions is at conflict with the Japanese norm of taking time to give a thoughtful response. In “Small Talk” discussions, the students often paused after one classmate spoke before speaking. Then, another person would speak, and the conversation would continue. Student interviews could provide valuable insight into this.

Another category that emerged from the interview with Shannon was student comfort levels. She adjusts her methods to student behavior, including the “consensus-gathering” behavior explained before. She, like the research, makes a distinction between ESL and EFL students, arguing that EFL students take longer to adjust to new classroom expectations and may actively resist responding to norms because of the pressure it puts on their language learning identity. Through the open responses in the survey, it was clear that students were making active attempts to adopt and respond to the norms established in this U.S. class. For example, one student described herself as having “*grown by studying abroad online*” and beginning to more readily volunteer answers in class.

As this was an EFL class online, the efforts made by Shannon to build a safe classroom were paramount. The class benefited from being small, as studies have found Japanese students are more likely to adapt their behavior if they are in a smaller classroom with strong scaffolding and peer relationships (Sasaki & Ortlieb, 2017; Saito & Ebsworth, 2004). In the survey, students rated the U.S. classroom expectations lower and yet also expressed an awareness of a change in their behavior. This tension can be interpreted as students stretching themselves to try new conversation strategies despite discomfort with new norms; these two feelings likely exist simultaneously.

### **Limitations of the study**

The study is limited in both breadth and depth. First, there was a limited sample size since this pilot study is focused on one teacher’s methods and there were only twelve students in the class. It is also lacking true depth. If this study were conducted again, follow-up interviews with both the teacher and the students would allow for deeper understanding behind the teacher methods and student survey responses.

### **Conclusion**

Adjusting teaching methods to each individual class of students is important for adaptability, effectiveness, and cultural responsibility. While knowing background information about Japanese culture and classroom expectations serves as a useful starting point, each student will fall on this scale at different points. Using methods supported by the current literature is not sufficient; it does not matter how much research supports a method if it causes students to feel uncomfortable and withdraw. In fact, the tensions a teacher might cause by forcing a poorly received method could permanently damage the student-teacher relationships

and negatively affect learning outcomes. As a teacher is a facilitator in a student-centered classroom, methods should be a negotiated discussion with students. If a teacher would like to introduce unfamiliar activities, they should take care to first build relationships with students, explain the pedagogical benefits, and slowly transition students into the new expectation.

It is admirable how Shannon adapts her range of CF methods to her students and how she involves them actively in the process by asking for their preferences. Although this conferencing can be a bit shocking for Japanese students at first, as they are not accustomed to being involved in decision-making about classroom structure, it allows for true student-centeredness. For example, Shannon had experienced many EFL classes that were comfortable putting their initials on the worksheets; however, when she asked this class, they declined. Instead of assuming past classes would represent all EFL classes as open to public correction, she gave this individual class influence in the matter, and gained better insight into her students' preferences as a result.

Based on the results of this pilot study, "Small Talk" is arguably a valuable activity to use in classes with Japanese EFL students. First, it requires student autonomy in picking the topic, presenting the video, and monitoring student conversation groups. Second, it allows for an additional type of CF in the classroom, in case some students are not as receptive to immediate CF.

Furthermore, both teachers and students benefit from understanding that expectations of oral participation are a cultural construct. Neither Japanese nor American norms are superior; however, students should be aware of the differences so they can make an educated decision about their behavior. While there is wide variability among individuals of each cultural group, if students are exposed to general American norms, they can better navigate future professional and educational settings. In addition, discussing culture can make EFL classes, often disconnected from student's daily lives and goals, more engaging, real, and relevant. If students feel like the language that they are studying is connected to actual people, it can increase engagement and motivation.

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