

My View

Student and Teacher Attitudes Towards Junior High School English Language Speech Contests in Japan

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Abstract

English speech contests are popular in Japan for junior high school students. However, despite the popularity of these contests, there is little published research regarding student and teacher attitudes towards them, particularly at the junior high school level. In order to bring these views to light, a survey of student participants in local and prefectural speech contests in Japan, and their teachers, was conducted. In particular, the perceived benefits of speech contest participation, as well as student motivation and anxiety in relation to these contests were investigated.

English language speech contests at the junior high school level are very popular and have a long history in Japan. For example, the Prince Takamado (formerly Takamatsu) Trophy All Japan Inter-Middle School English Oratorical Contest has been operating since 1949 and “hundreds of thousands of students enter each year” (Japan National Student Association Fund). In addition to this contest, there are numerous local and prefectural contests which students may compete in. Preparations for speech contests can be extensive for both teachers and students; thus a clear idea of what draws people to participate in these contests and whether they feel the experience justifies the effort would be useful. To this end, three different research questions of the speech contest experience were investigated from both student and teacher perspectives:

- 1) What motivates student participation?
- 2) What are the perceived benefits to participation?
- 3) Is the experience positive?

Motivation

There are many different ways of looking at motivation (see Brown, 2007; Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011). Motivation can be fluid, and different types of motivation can co-exist within the same person. Thus, by asking questions related to different aspects of motivation, it should be possible to get closer to an overall picture of student motivation.

One way of looking at motivation is in terms of extrinsic (coming from an outside source like a teacher or parent) and intrinsic (coming from the student). In the case of speech contests there are many ways extrinsic motivation can play a role. Bury, Sellick, and Yamamoto (2012) mention that winning a speech contest is prestigious and carries benefits for the students in terms of awards ceremonies at their school. In some cases (such as the Prince Takamado contest), there can also be lucrative prizes to be won as well as travel opportunities. One form of extrinsic motivation, called instrumental motivation, relates to a desire for anticipated practical benefits such as future university entrance or employment advantages, both of which can result from

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winning a speech contest. On the other hand, intrinsic motivation (which comes from the students themselves rather than from an outside source such as getting a prize) is generally considered more powerful than extrinsic motivation (Brown, 2007). Examples of intrinsic motivation can include students joining a speech contest because they enjoy communicating in English, or for the joy of overcoming a challenge and pushing themselves to reach their full potential.

Finally, many of the participants in speech contests are members of an English club and enter the contest and practice alongside their friends. In addition, many will enter a contest as part of a team, so group dynamics and social interaction could also be a motivating factor in participation.

Benefits for the participants

Public speaking is a useful skill in a variety of employment contexts, from business presentations to politics, teaching, and the performing arts. Speeches are typically judged based on factors such as phonology, body language, and style (as well as speech content in the case of original speeches). Thus, teachers spend a great deal of time working on students' pronunciation, intonation, and presentation style (voice volume, eye contact, gestures, etc.). In addition to this extra-curricular training with teachers, students will typically spend many hours by themselves memorizing their speech and practicing. Considering the time and effort invested in speech contest participation, and the fact that many students are likely motivated to do speech contests to improve their English ability, it is worth exploring whether students and teachers feel that students have actually improved as a result.

Student anxiety

Anxiety can arise from a variety of factors. According to Brown (2007), anxiety can be a general personality factor of the student (trait anxiety), related to a situation (state anxiety), or a

particular task (situation-specific anxiety). In addition to whatever a student's natural anxiety levels may be, there are many additional factors that arise in a speech contest situation.

There is a lot of pressure placed on students during a speech contest. They have only one opportunity to prove themselves after weeks of practice and they must present the speech from memory, without access to notes. They also have to sit quietly (possibly for hours) waiting their turn to speak and only the top participants receive prizes. These factors can create a tense atmosphere. Furthermore, students sometimes forget their speech midway through, which can be a mortifying experience for both the student and onlookers in a public contest. And finally, when the results of the competition are announced, students who did not receive first prize can often appear visibly upset. With those factors to consider, it is important to explore the extent to which speech contests can be anxiety inducing and possibly demotivating.

Method

In order to investigate the aforementioned aspects of speech contest participation, a questionnaire was given to students and teachers immediately after participation in various speech contests. An original survey was created because, as noted by Dornyei and Ushioda (2011, p. 214), "... motivation questionnaires are highly context-dependent and therefore even well-established batteries cannot be simply transferred without considerable adjustments." The survey was written in English and then translated into Japanese by a native-Japanese speaker. The survey was bilingual so that students could answer regardless of English ability. Respondents were asked to mark their responses on a six-point Likert scale: 3=Strongly agree; 2=Agree; 1=Slightly agree; -1=Slightly disagree; -2=Disagree; -3=Strongly disagree. Thus the closer the mean is to 3, the greater the agreement with the statement, and the closer the mean is to -3, the greater the disagreement. A six-point scale (rather than an odd-numbered scale) was used so that participants would have to take a clear position.

The first survey was anonymous and administered at the Kochi City public school speech contest held in July. There were 73 participants in the contest, representing 17 public junior high schools in the city, and 59 responses were returned. The surveys were anonymous and did not

differentiate between recitation and original speeches, or between students who competed individually or as part of a group. This contest is the first of the school year, and, thus, the first English speech contest experience for many students. It is slightly less competitive than the other contests examined, with students given a level grade (Good, Very Good, or Excellent) rather than a rank. This survey was later repeated with 18 students who participated in one of the three fall contests held in Kochi City (Prince Takamado, Seiwa Joshi, and Kochi prefectural speech contests), but this time permission was sought from parents and the surveys were not anonymous. As these contests took place during a similar time of year and were of a higher level of competitiveness, the results were pooled together for comparison with the first contest survey results. In addition, eight teachers who trained students participating in these speech contests were given a similar survey in order to gain a further perspective on speech contests and to see how this perspective compares with that of the participants themselves.

Results

Table 1 shows the responses to survey questions related to motivation of students who participated in speech contests, while Table 2 summarizes teacher responses to questions regarding student speech contest participant motivation.

Table 1. Student Survey Responses Regarding Motivational Factors

Student survey statements	July contest mean (n=59)	July contest standard deviation	Other contest mean (n=18)	Other contest standard deviation
I do speech contests because I want to get a prize.	0.07	1.96	-0.22	1.77
I think English is important for my future.	2.29	1.23	2.67	0.59

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I do speech contests because I want to improve my English ability.	1.67	1.47	1.67	1.53
I do speech contests because they are fun.	1.15	1.71	1.06	1.63
I do speech contests because my friends are also participating.	-0.15	2.05	-1.11	1.68

Table 2. Teacher Responses Regarding Student Motivational Factors

Teacher survey statements	Mean (n=8)	Standard deviation
Students are motivated by winning prizes.	1.38	1.19
Students are motivated by improving English ability.	1	1.41
Students are motivated by their friends.	1.13	0.99

Table 3 shows student survey responses to questions related to the perceived changes in regards to pronunciation, intonation, and public speaking confidence that result from entering an English speech contest.

Table 3. Student Survey Responses Regarding Speech Improvement Following Speech Contest Participation

Student survey statements	July contest mean (n=59)	July contest standard deviation	Other contest mean (n=18)	Other contest standard deviation

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My pronunciation has improved.	1.54	1.28	2.28	0.96
My intonation has improved.	1.46	1.32	2.39	1.04
My public speaking confidence has improved.	1.53	1.24	2.28	0.89

The views of teachers regarding the effect of participating in speech contests on their students' pronunciation, intonation, and public speaking are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Teacher Survey Responses Regarding Student Speech Improvement Following Speech Contest Participation

Teacher survey statements	Mean (n=8)	Standard deviation
Speech contests improve students' pronunciation.	2.25	0.71
Speech contests improve students' intonation.	2.13	0.83
Speech contests improve students' confidence.	2.75	0.71

Levels of student stress, enjoyment, and desire to participate in future speech contests are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Student Survey Responses Regarding the Overall Speech Contest Experience

Student survey statements	July contest mean (n=59)	July contest standard deviation	Other contest mean (n=18)	Other contest standard deviation
Speech contests are stressful.	-1.51	1.65	-1.67	1.28
Speech contests are fun.	1.83	1.09	1.61	1.54
I want to do an English speech contest again.	1.66	1.36	2.17	0.71

Finally, Table 6 shows teacher opinions regarding the amount of stress and enjoyment experienced by students during a speech contest, as well as whether the time devoted to preparing students for contests was well spent.

Table 6. Teacher Survey Responses Regarding the Overall Speech Contest Experience.

Teacher survey statements	Mean (n=8)	standard deviation
Speech contests cause students stress.	-0.75	1.16
Students enjoy speech contests.	2.25	0.71
Speech contests are an effective use of my time.	2.38	0.74

Discussion

This study was conducted to investigate three questions regarding English speech contests: What motivates students to participate? What benefits to they feel they receive from that participation? Is the experience of participating a positive one?

These three questions are discussed individually below.

Motivation

In terms of extrinsic motivation, Table 1 indicates that winning a prize does not appear to be a strong motivating factor for all students, with both sets of students reporting a mean close to zero. Thus, while for some students getting a prize is an important source of motivation, there must be additional instrumental motivational factors at play. However, Table 2 shows that prizes are seen by teachers as the most important motivating factor for students.

In contrast, instrumental motivation appears to be strong as most students feel English is important for their future (Table 1). Furthermore, students generally believe that participating in speech contests will improve their English abilities (Table 1), a source of motivation that teachers also see in their students (Table 2) although to a slightly lesser degree.

However, many students also seem to enjoy English for its own sake, and enter speech contests because they enjoy the experience of participating (Table 1), an indication of intrinsic motivation. This makes sense as there is a great time commitment involved in speech contest preparation and therefore, students who do not already enjoy English would be unlikely to either enter a contest or complete the necessary practice. Teachers would also be unlikely to invest time in training students for a non-mandatory contest if the students did not enjoy the experience.

Finally, there is the social aspect of speech contests and how this influences the desire of students to participate. However, the results of the survey in terms of social influences appear mixed. Although students on average feel that friends are not an important factor (Table 1), teachers generally feel that a student's friends are motivating (Table 2). Also, although both groups of students surveyed disagreed with the statement that they do speech contests because

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their friends are participating, there was a difference in the degree of disagreement between the two groups (means of -0.15 and -1.11 respectively for the July and other speech contest groups). This may be because the July speech contest is less competitive, and the participants in the subsequent fall contests may be more personally motivated, even if they participate in a group speech.

In conclusion, the results of the surveys conducted indicate that extrinsic motivation in the form of prizes does not play as large a factor in student motivation as instrumental motivation or intrinsic motivation does. However, teachers view extrinsic rewards as more motivating for students than intrinsic factors such as improving students' English abilities. In addition, students do not identify the participation of their friends as a strong motivating factor (despite the prevalence of group speeches), although teachers do generally see friends as a motivating factor for students. These results serve as a reminder for teachers to be careful when making assumptions regarding student motivation as these assumptions may not reflect the student reality. Furthermore, when teachers are attempting to recruit students for participation in speech contests, placing an emphasis on personal improvement rather than social factors or winning prizes may be a more useful approach.

Benefits

The consensus seems to be that students (Table 3) and their teachers (Table 4) feel that students have improved in terms of pronunciation, intonation, and public speaking skills. This is a positive result as it indicates that the long hours of practice are perceived to result in practical gains in terms of English public speaking ability, particularly since improving these abilities appears to be a strong source of motivation for students (as shown in the previous section). However, in terms of pronunciation improvement at least, these improvements may lessen over time following the end of active speech contest practice (Head, 2015).

Another interesting result is that the participants in the July contest generally felt less strongly about the improvement than participants in other contests. This may be due to the fact

that the other contests are more serious and participants may have begun preparations earlier or more intensely as a result, and thus have seen a greater improvement.

Student anxiety and the overall speech contest experience

Surprisingly, the majority of students claim that speech contests are not stressful (Table 5), despite the high-stakes nature of a speech contest. Teachers on average also disagreed with the statement that the contests are stressful, although the level of disagreement was less strong than that of the students. (Table 6). This may indicate that the actual experience is less stressful than it appears to outside observers. Thus teachers watching a seemingly stressful situation should not assume that this will result in student anxiety and demotivation in regards to learning English or future speech contest participation. In fact, most students feel that speech contests are fun and that they wish to participate again in the future (Table 5). Likewise, teachers agree that students enjoy speech contests and that they feel that preparing students for these contests is an effective use of their time (Table 6), despite the long hours of preparation often required. Therefore, teachers at schools that do not currently participate in English speech contests should consider either joining an existing contest in the future or even creating their own.

Of course, it is important to remember that participation in these speech contests was non-mandatory. In a whole-class mandatory speech contest, motivation and the level of enjoyment by students may be different. Furthermore, teachers are unlikely to have the same amount of time to devote to practicing with each participant; thus the level of self-improvement observed by the students may be lower.

Conclusion

Through conducting a survey of junior high school English speech contest participants and teachers, it has been revealed that there are many aspects of motivation involved in student participation in speech contests, and that these are not always the same as what outside observers, even teachers who work closely with the students, identify as important. Furthermore, students

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generally feel that they have benefited from the experience of entering a speech contest and that the overall experience is positive. Of course, this is a small sample, and may not reflect the situation present in other prefectures or countries, or at different school levels, such as university. However, it is encouraging to know that the large amount of effort invested in these contests can have a positive impact, at least for those students who voluntarily participate.

References

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