

FOSTERING POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD ENGLISH LEARNING: A JAPANESE SCHOOL CASE USING “SMALL TALK” AND INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract

The early introduction and formalization of English education in elementary schools have made the transition between elementary and junior high school a critical issue. While the introduction of foreign language activities in elementary schools has improved students' English proficiency and reduced resistance to learning English, the number of children who dislike English has been increasing. Factors cited for this include insufficient coordination between elementary and junior high schools, increased difficulty in content, and teaching methods. At the elementary level, the goal is to cultivate the foundational qualities and abilities for communication, and language activities are essential for achieving this. It is hypothesized that the effective utilization of Small Talk from an intercultural perspective can help children experience the joy of communication, thereby sustaining or enhancing their motivation for English learning and fostering their interest in cross-cultural understanding. This presentation reports on the findings from an inquiry into how a year-long focus on Small Talk instruction at Elementary School A influenced children's perceptions and learning motivation. Using the classroom practices at Elementary School A, where English aversion is low, as a case study, we clarify how children's positive attitudes toward English learning are sustained through a year of classroom observation, student questionnaires, and interviews with the teaching staffs. This study examines classroom features that foster positive engagement in English language learning among Japanese elementary school students, with a particular focus on Small Talk and international understanding. The lessons are characterized by innovative use of Small Talk and dynamic progression. Multiple instances of Small Talk are conducted with assistant language teachers (ALTs) during each class session—including introductions, pre-activity demonstrations, and mid-lesson guidance—creating an environment in which children naturally become familiar with English expressions. Instructors primarily use Classroom English, employing simple language supported by concrete objects and gestures to minimize Japanese usage. This approach cultivates students' ability to infer meaning from purpose, context, and situation. Instructional formats appropriately combine whole-class, individual, and collaborative learning to deliver personalized guidance. Additionally, ICT tools such as tablets and digital textbooks are partially and effectively utilized to visualize learning and provide interactive experiences designed to spark children's interest. Abundant opportunities for language activities and performances in pairs or groups are provided, with JTEs and ALTs actively engaging in communication tasks and offering positive feedback. The lesson design also incorporates perspectives on cross-cultural and international understanding, contributing to the development of students' global awareness and communicative competence.

Keywords: *Small talk, international understanding, Japanese elementary school, English education.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In 2020, a new course of study was implemented, introducing foreign language activities in grades 3 and 4 and formal English education in grades 5 and 6. This early introduction has made the transition from elementary to junior high school a critical issue. Although foreign language learning in elementary schools has improved proficiency and reduced resistance, the number of children who dislike English has continued to rise, due in part to insufficient coordination between school levels, increased difficulty, and instructional methods (MEXT, 2024). National surveys show that the percentage of students who dislike English increased from 23.7% in 2013 to 31.5% in 2021, and disparities in English mastery have emerged depending on access to cram schools (Toyo Keizai, 2025). Interest in English also tends to diverge in the upper grades, with only about 60% of 6th graders reporting that they like English (Benesse, 2023). Meanwhile, junior high school students who actively engaged in language activities reported higher

achievement and more positive attitudes (MEXT/NIEP, 2024), suggesting that language activities are key to fostering interest and understanding. At the elementary level, the goal is to cultivate foundational communicative abilities, making meaningful language activities essential. In an EFL context such as Japan, it is particularly important to establish clear objectives, contexts, and opportunities for English use. Foreign language learning can also stimulate curiosity about the world and serve as a bridge to global awareness and intercultural understanding (Ishimori, 2019). Based on this perspective, this study hypothesizes that the effective use of “Small Talk,” framed interculturally, enables children to experience the joy of communication and thereby sustains or enhances their motivation for English learning.

1.2. “Small talk”

In order to develop pupils’ speaking skills, short oral interaction/conversations between teachers and pupils or among pupils themselves—namely, Small Talk—are recommended (MEXT, 2017). In English-speaking countries, “small talk” refers to a light conversation, chit-chat, or a casual talk about unimportant topics. However, in Japanese English education, it means short conversations designed to reinforce English expressions, and in most cases, it consists of two or three set phrases on a given theme. The primary objective of Small Talk is to strengthen previously learned expressions and to learn basic expressions or strategies necessary for continuing dialogue (MEXT, 2017). However, simply repeating the fixed phrases introduced in textbooks does not effectively foster communication skills.

2. Design

2.1. Hypothesis

This study is grounded in the following hypotheses. Language activities constitute a fundamental component in the development of communicative competence. For pupils at the initial stages of English learning, it is essential to engage in Small Talk as a foundational communicative tool. The continuous and effective implementation of such activities is expected to foster a sense of enjoyment in using English, thereby enhancing learners’ motivation to study the language and cultivating interest in foreign cultures. Consequently, these practices may contribute to reducing negative attitudes toward English and mitigating feelings of aversion. Furthermore, as the previous research suggests (Cates, 2002; Ishimori, 2019), it is anticipated that the process of learning English will serve as a gateway to intercultural understanding, evoking curiosity and a sense of pleasure in exploring diverse cultural perspectives.

2.2. Objective

Elementary School A, a mid-sized public school in rural northern Japan, shows a notably low level of aversion to English compared with national and prefectural averages. In the 2024 National Academic Achievement Survey, 69.3% of sixth graders nationwide and 67.3% in the prefecture reported that they “like” or “rather like” English, whereas 75.5% of students at Elementary School A expressed positive attitudes. This outcome is presumed to reflect the school’s emphasis on Small Talk since the 2023 academic year. Building on this context, the present study uses Elementary School A as a case study to examine how positive attitudes toward English—including interest in foreign cultures and global issues—are cultivated. Specifically, it explores the background of this situation and identifies educational factors that help prevent the development of negative attitudes toward English.

3. Methods

This study reports findings from an inquiry into how a year-long emphasis on Small Talk instruction at Elementary School A influenced pupils’ perceptions and learning motivation. The classroom practices at Elementary School A, where aversion to English is relatively low, are employed as a case study to elucidate how pupils’ positive attitudes toward English learning are sustained. Evidence is drawn from a year of classroom observation, student questionnaires, and interviews with teaching staff.

(1) Survey target, period, and procedures:

The survey was conducted with four sixth-grade classes (115 students in total) at a medium-sized public elementary school in northern Japan (School A). The survey period encompassed one academic year, from April 2024 to March 2025. At the time of the study, School A employed a Japanese Teacher of English (JTE), aged 29, and an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) from the United States, aged 33. These teachers had been engaged in team-teaching (TT) for grades 3 through 6 since 2021. Beginning in the previous academic year (2023), the teachers collaborated with the researcher to enrich language activities with a particular emphasis on Small Talk. With the consent of School A, non-participatory classroom observations were systematically conducted throughout the survey period, maintaining an objective stance while collecting data on instructional practices and learner engagement. Specifically, the Small Talk conducted

by the two teachers was video-recorded and transcribed, while pupils’s reactions and spontaneous utterances were documented during classroom observations in order to accumulate qualitative data. Student questionnaires were also conducted, furthermore, post-classroom research discussions were held once or twice per month to accumulate additional insights into the teaching and learning processes. All data collection procedures adhered to ethical guidelines and ensured the protection of personal information.

(2) Methods:

In addition to classroom observations conducted throughout the 2024 school year, qualitative and quantitative data were collected through multiple instruments. Student questionnaires were administered three times (July, December, and March) via Google Forms, and the results informed subsequent reflections and discussions. Based on these findings, interviews were conducted with the JTE three times (January, February, and April 2025) and with the ALT twice (January and February 2025) to gather their interpretations, instructional approaches, and perceptions of pupils’ learning attitudes. Together with classroom observations and post-lesson discussions, these interviews provided triangulated data for examining the educational factors that sustain positive attitudes toward English learning.

4. Classroom practice

4.1. Overview (features of the lesson)

This study examines classroom features that foster positive engagement in English language learning among Japanese elementary school students, with particular emphasis on Small Talk and international understanding. Multiple instances of Small Talk are conducted by the JTE and ALT during each class session—including introductions, pre-activity demonstrations, and mid-lesson guidance—thereby creating an environment in which pupils naturally become familiar with English expressions. The teachers primarily employ simple forms of “Classroom English,” using accessible language supported by concrete objects and gestures to minimize reliance on Japanese. This approach cultivates students’ ability to infer meaning from purpose, context, and situation. Instructional formats combine whole-class, individual, and collaborative learning in ways that allow for personalized guidance. In addition, ICT tools such as tablets and digital textbooks are partially and effectively utilized to visualize learning and provide interactive experiences designed to stimulate pupils’ interest. In the observed classes, abundant opportunities for language activities and performances in pairs or groups were provided, with the JTE and ALT actively engaging in communication tasks and offering positive feedback to pupils. The lesson design also incorporates perspectives on cross-cultural and international understanding, thereby contributing to the development of students’ global awareness and communicative competence.

4.2. Examples of small talk

An illustrative example of “Small Talk” conducted during the lessons is presented below.

Table 1. Small Talk to encourage motivation to take action from familiarity with the target expression and raising global awareness (Note: ALT’s name is Mark. “sensei” in Japanese means “teacher”).

JTE:	What animal do you want to study?
ALT:	I want to study bears. Bears live in the forest. Forest loss is a big problem.
JTE:	What can you do?
ALT:	I can reduce paper. I use bamboo items. Please look at these. <i>(The ALT displays bamboo balls, spoons, and other items brought from home, taking them out of a bag and showing them to the pupils.)</i>
	I use these items at home every day. Using bamboo is more sustainable.
JTE:	<i>(Toward the pupils)</i> Why Mark sensei uses bamboo items? Not wooden items?
Ss:	<i>(Activities: Exchange of opinions among pupils)</i>
S1:	global warming <i>(in Japanese)</i>
JTE:	Global warming! Global warming is a big problem.
ALT:	Using bamboo items, trees cannot get cut. How about you? What animal do you want to research?
JTE:	I want to research tuna. We enjoy tuna sushi, sashimi and so on but overfishing is a big problem.
	<i>(While showing slides to the pupils)</i> Please look at this picture. Do you know this?
Ss:	Ehomaki!
JTE:	Yes. People who have eaten <i>(in Japanese)</i> , raise your hands! Please look at this picture.
	<i>(While showing a slide image of a large amount of Ehomaki being thrown away)</i> What’s this?
Ss:	<i>(Thrown away!)</i> (MOTTAINAI!<What a waste!>) <i>(in Japanese)</i>
JTE:	Yes. Food loss. Food loss is a big problem. We can reduce food loss. Do you know 4 R?
	Please talk about 4R with your friends.
Ss:	<i>(Activities: Exchange of opinions among pupils)</i>
JTE:	<i>(While presenting the relevant part of the textbook)</i> Reduce, reuse, recycle and refuse. Mark sensei, what is “refuse”?
ALT:	Refuse is “no thank you!” <i>(using gesture)</i>

(Source) Created by the author based on class observation

What is notable in this lesson is the pupils' familiarity with target expressions (e.g., "XX is a big problem"), the effective use of real objects, and the teachers' prompts that stimulate thinking and highlight connections between environmental issues and daily life. The important expression was used naturally, enabling learners to internalize it within a communicative context. The ALT introduced bamboo tableware brought from home, explaining its sustainability and environmental benefits, while the JTE encouraged reflection through questions in English. Although students initially responded with a simple repetition of "global warming," the ALT supplemented by clarifying that using bamboo items prevents deforestation, thereby linking action to consequence. Through such supplementation and concrete examples, the lesson fostered logical reasoning and deeper comprehension.

This example illustrates that Small Talk extends beyond the fixed conversational patterns presented in textbooks. Rather than limiting practice to predetermined dialogues, it develops into a natural, comprehensible, and socially grounded form of interaction. Teachers and students collaboratively advance the conversation through questions and responses, thereby creating a new form of Small Talk. In other words, Small Talk is reconceptualized as a communicative tool. Furthermore, by introducing environmental issues, students are encouraged to think deeply while learning language. This serves as an exemplary case of how English learning can be meaningfully connected to real-world issues/themes, thereby demonstrating the potential of language education to foster global awareness.

4.3. How to use small talk

According to MEXT (2017a,b), Small Talk is prescribed to be conducted approximately once every two lessons as a routine activity for reviewing previously learned material. However, as demonstrated in the case of this school, Small Talk can be utilized in far more diverse ways as a communicative tool, extending beyond mere review to foster authentic interaction and engagement.

In the observed lessons, Small Talk was implemented regularly, occurring in every lesson approximately three to five times in various formats. Its use took diverse forms, including exchanges between the ALT and JTE, interactions involving the ALT/JTE and the whole class, dialogues with selected students, pair work among students, small-group discussions, and whole-class communication activities such as moving around the classroom. The functions of Small Talk were equally varied: greetings, the introduction of new units or topics, the presentation of new expressions, teacher demonstrations prior to student language activities, modeling and sharing goals before performance tests, reviewing, and providing guidance during student activities. Student pairs used it to confirm understanding and practice collaboratively, while groups and the entire class engaged in Small Talk as part of language activities that emphasized the enjoyment of authentic communication. In this way, Small Talk functioned as a bridge from mechanical practice to genuine language use, fostering engagement and communicative competence.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Questionnaire results

Even as the study progressed and the content became more difficult, pupils' understanding remained around 95% throughout the year, and positive attitudes toward English stayed high. Even just before entering junior high school (March), only 4 of 115 students (3.5%) reported that they "somewhat disliked" English. Students also expressed a clear sense of progress, as reflected in comments such as, "I am beginning to understand the teachers' Small Talk (in English)."

5.2. Characteristics of the class

The class is characterized by unique and varied Small Talks that do not follow a pattern, and by the use of multiple Small Talks with ALTs in each class, introductions, demonstrations before language activities, mid-term instruction, etc., to create an environment where pupils naturally become familiar with English expression. Teachers employ Classroom English with simple expressions, objects, and gestures to reduce Japanese and enhance contextual inference. Their pedagogy combines simultaneous, individual, and cooperative learning to address diverse student needs. Also, tablets and digital textbooks are partially and effectively used to visualize learning, provide interactive learning experiences, and draw out students' interests. The school provides ample opportunities for pupils to engage in language activities and performances in pairs and groups, and JTE/ALTs are actively involved in communicative activities, providing positive feedback. The instructional design is noteworthy in that it incorporates the perspective of international understanding.

5.3. From the interview

Following the series of lessons, interviews were conducted with both the JTE and the ALT to examine how Small Talk was conceptualized and used in classroom practice. The JTE noted that

communication cannot be created through fixed textbook exchanges alone and that enriching Small Talk enhances language activities and facilitates feedback, which in turn builds students' confidence. The ALT similarly emphasized that relying solely on textbooks is unengaging, and that enjoyable Small Talk contributes to positive learning outcomes. These perspectives suggest that Small Talk, when implemented beyond fixed exchanges, fosters more meaningful language use, supports effective feedback, and enhances students' confidence and motivation by making English learning enjoyable and engaging.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Verification of the hypothesis

The findings of this study support the initial hypotheses. The sustained use of Small Talk as a communicative tool proved effective in fostering enjoyment in English language use among elementary school learners. Through continuous engagement in short yet meaningful interactions containing global messages, students demonstrated increased motivation to learn English and heightened interest in foreign cultures. The practice also contributed to reducing negative attitudes toward English, mitigating feelings of aversion. Furthermore, integrating Small Talk into classroom activities facilitated connections between English learning and broader intercultural understanding, reinforcing the perception of English as a gateway to global perspectives. Taken together, these results indicate that Small Talk can function not merely as a supplementary activity but as a pedagogically significant approach that enhances communicative competence and nurtures positive dispositions toward language learning.

6.2. Implication

As a result of one year of practical research, several distinctive features of these English lessons—beyond the role of Small Talk—were identified as contributing to the low level of aversion to English. First, continuous exposure to appropriately challenging English allowed students to experience partial difficulty followed by gradual understanding, stimulating curiosity and a sense of growth. Second, the lessons were learner-centered, encouraging active participation and positioning each child as an autonomous, dynamic participant. Third, the topics were closely connected to society, the wider world, and students' daily lives, fostering relevance, social utility, and awareness of global issues and intercultural understanding. Finally, the lessons created learning spaces independent of “teacher-talk,” promoting self-determination, autonomy, responsibility, and self-management while enhancing enjoyment. Collectively, these characteristics illustrate how elementary English education can move beyond patterned practice to foster meaningful engagement, motivation, and positive attitudes toward language learning.

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