An after school program to prepare senior high school students for external speech contests: Implementation and feedback

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A voluntary after school program to prepare students for external speech contests was introduced in a senior high school. The students' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the program were assessed. Analysis of the data shows a high level of satisfaction and the participating students reported their confidence and levels of speaking and writing had improved. Furthermore, the program offered new learning contexts that were beneficial to the students and developed their skills in the language areas that they found most difficult. The students also had the opportunity to voice their opinions and work autonomously, which empowered them to develop their English skills with a definite goal.

外部スピーチコンテスト対策プログラムが高校で開始された。その対策プログラムに参加する生徒のプログラムに対する認識、及び姿勢が調査された。データの分析の結果、プログラムに参加した生徒は高い満足度を示し、自信とスピーキングとライティングのレベルが向上したと報告した。更に、その対策プログラムでは、生徒の役に立ち、なおかつ生徒たちが最も難しいと考えている言語分野のスキルを向上させる新しい学習内容が提供された。生徒たちは、自分の意見を発表し、自主的に学習をすすめる機会もまた持つことが出来た。それによって、明確な目標を持ち、英語のスキルを発展させようとする自立心が養成された。

There is a long tradition of participation in English speech contests in Japanese education, and they are often the source of great prestige for both the winners and their schools. Perhaps the majority of secondary schools have internal speech contests, with students competing against each other at events such as school culture festivals. However, there are also many external competitions in Japan that allow students an opportunity to test their writing and speech-giving abilities against those from other educational institutions. These competitions present both students and their schools with the chance to gain more recognition of their English ability on the wider stage, which can in turn produce numerous advantages, such as increased applications to the school.

Entering a speech contest has many benefits for students, and incorporates the four English skills as the students write their own speeches, negotiate the topic and structure of the speech with their tutor, research their speeches independently, and then deliver the speech. It also provides the students with an opportunity to function in an autonomous context, further developing their confidence and empowering them to use English in a fulfilling and rewarding way. Bradley (2005) claims that speech contests also allow students to proffer opinions regarding topics that they may not usually encounter in the classroom. Furthermore, having entered a speech contest can be an extra asset when

applying to university, and gaining achieving a prize or special mention is well received.

Preparation for contests is essential if a student is to be successful, and in many Japanese institutes, ranging from junior high schools to universities, native-speakers of English often take some or all of the responsibility of training and coaching the participants.

This paper investigates the implementation of a new after school program that was introduced at a senior high school and the students' perception of, and attitudes towards, the program. The school is a 6-year private secondary boarding school, based in the Kanto region of Japan, which, until 2010, only entered an extremely small number (fewer than three in any given year) of students independently into external speech competitions. A limited number of students are entered into internal speech contests held three times a year. The school places a strong emphasis on English, and employs twelve native-speakers of English who serve in both team-teaching and sole teacher capacities. For students in years four to six, classes with native-speakers of English are optional, but have an extremely low drop-out rate. Although the native-speakers' lessons cover all four skills, their primary focus is in developing speaking and listening skills through communicative methods.

As the students in this school have an unusually large amount of contact time with native-speakers of English, and the school is promoted as one in which English is a main priority and focus, it was proposed that the students should have the opportunity to participate in external speech contests. Consequently, the after school program was established.

Murphey and Sasaki (1998) report that in general, English use decreases in the classroom as students progress through junior to senior high school as it is believed that the curriculum can be taught more efficiently in Japanese (Burden, 2001). Therefore, in addition to boosting participation in external speech contests, a key aim and benefit of the program is to maintain, or increase, the amount of contact time students get with native English teachers, and thus the opportunity to use English. Chances for students to develop their long-writing skills through the curriculum are also often limited with a strong emphasis being put on sentence level grammatical structures, so this program would enable students to practicse and further enhance these skills.

Setting up the Program

As this was a new project at the school, a proposal was drawn up and presented to the Head of English teaching. It was agreed with the Head of English teaching to trial pilot the program in its first year with the 5th-year students only, and subsequently the program and some competitions were introduced to the 5th-year students at a yearly group assembly. Entry into the program was entirely voluntary, and it was made clear to the students that they could drop out at any time if they felt that they did not wish to continue.

It was initially assumed that the students would show a positive interest in the program, and that about ten students would choose to enter. Consequently, the criterion of success that was established was for a total of ten speeches to be submitted to various external speech contests by the end of the academic year.

The actual initial response was considerably higher than had been anticipated, with 25 students of the 117 5th year students that participate in lessons with the native-speakers of English joining (21.4%). The participating students consisted of 21 female students and four male students, with a median age of 17. These students were divided between the two participating native-speakers of English, who then took on the responsibility of helping the students write and research their speeches, and also coaching them with regards to the various factors important in giving a successful speech, such as intonation and pace.

It was decided that, due to time constraints (in particular, club activities), each student would formally meet with their allocated assigned teacher once a week for a period of 15 to 30 minutes. The students had the choice as to whether they would meet their teacher individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Of the 25 participants, all but six decided to attend individually.

A total of 17 students of the 25 opted to enter speech contests with submission deadlines in

early June. Of the remaining eight students, two opted to leave the course (one male and one female), and six to prepare speeches for contests with submission deadlines in July through October. Of the entries, one student progressed to a semi-final round, while a second student received an exemplary speech award. Six students also participated in the school's internal speech contests, with two taking first place and three second.

As each student submitted their first speeches to a contest, they were asked to complete a questionnaire (Appendix A) regarding the program and their experiences of it, with an 87% response rate obtained. The results are presented and discussed below.

Results

The responses given in the questionnaires showed an overwhelmingly positive response to the program, and the data are presented below in Tables 1 and 2 below. Several items (Q1-4, Q9-10, and Q12-21) allowed students to make their own, unstructured comments, translations of which are provided in Appendix B.

The main reasons given for joining the program (Q1) were to improve their English ability and their enjoyment of English. Subsidiary reasons were the chance to compare their English ability with students from other schools and that entering speech contests can help with university entry. By far the majority of the students had never entered a speech contest before (Q2), with all of those who had having experience of the

Table 1. Response Rates for Questions 1, 2, and 14-20.

Q1		Q2		Q14		Q15		Q16		Q17		Q18		Q19		Q20	
a	8	Y	4	Y	10	Y	6	Y	6	Y	0	a	3	Y	12	a	4
b	14	N	11	N	5	N	9	N	8	N	14	b	3	N	3	b	1
c	4											c	0			c	9
d	4											d	8			d	1
e	0											e	5				
f	2											f	1				
g	1																
h	1																

Q1. Why did you want to join the speech contest preparation lessons? (a. I enjoy speaking English, b. I wanted to improve my English, c. I wanted to check my English level against students from other schools, d. It is good for my university application, e. I wanted to win a prize, f. It was a new course at the school, g. My teacher told me to, h. Other); Q2. Have you entered a speech contest before?; Q14. Did you write your work in Japanese and then translate it?; Q15. Did you ask a Japanese teacher for help?; Q16. Did you have any problems researching your topic?; Q17. Could the teachers have helped you research your topic more?; Q18. Which was hardest for you in your writing? (a. Structuring the essay, b. Vocabulary, c. Finding a topic, d. Writing the sentences (Grammar), e. Expressing an opinion, f. Length of speech); Q19. Will you enter another speech contest?; Q20. How would you prefer the classes to be? (a. Individually, b. Pairs, c. Small groups, d. Large groups)

Table 2. Mean Scores for Questions 3-13.

Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13
4.20	3.73	3.40	3.27	3.73	3.80	4.07	4.33	3.64	4.20	3.93

Q3. How much do you agree with the statement 'In general, entering speech contests helps to improve students' English'?; Q4. How much do you agree with the statement 'External speech contests are more beneficial than internal speech contests'? Q5. How much do you think joining this course has increased your confidence in speaking English?; Q6. How much do you think joining this course has increased your confidence in writing English?; Q7. How much do you think joining this course has improved your English speaking?; Q8. How much do you think joining this course has improved your English writing?; Q9. How much do you agree with the statement 'The speech preparation lessons were useful'?; Q10. How much do you agree with the statement 'I was given enough help when preparing my speech'?; Q11. How much do you agree with the statement 'I had enough lessons with my teacher to prepare'?; Q12. How much do you agree with the statement 'I would recommend joining the course to my friends'?; Q13. How much do you agree with the statement 'More students should join the course'?

school's internal speech contests. The students showed strong agreement that entering speech contests was a good way to improve their English (Q3), and moderate agreement that external speech contests were of greater value than internal speech contests (Q4). The students indicated that taking the program had had a moderately positive effect on their confidence in speaking and writing English (Q5, Q6), and that their spoken and written English had shown a moderate improvement (Q7, Q8).

The students indicated a high satisfaction with the program (Q9), and also that they had received sufficient assistance from the native teachers (Q10). However, there was only moderate agreement that they had had enough contact time with the native teachers (Q11).

The students indicated strongly that they would recommend the program to their friends (Q12), and showed a moderately strong agreement that more students should join the program (Q13).

Two thirds of the students initially wrote their speeches in Japanese before translating them into English (Q14), but only about one third of the students approached a Japanese teacher of English for assistance (Q15).

Over one third of the students reported having some difficulty determining a theme for their speeches (Q16), but none of the students sought help with researching their chosen topics (Q17). Perhaps, unsurprisingly, the most commonly reported difficulty was writing grammatically correct sentences in English (Q18), with pronunciation, selecting vocabulary, the structure of the speech and its length being reported by smaller numbers of students. A large majority of the students stated that they wanted to enter more speech contests (Q19), something which that has certainly been borne out by their subsequent behavior.

Surprisingly, given that the majority of the students opted to practice individually or in pairs, when asked what size group they thought was best almost two thirds expressed a preference for small groups (Q20), with just under one third preferring to continue with individual classes, and only two students expressing preferences for large group lessons.

Discussion

The data indicates that the implementation of an external speech contest program has been successful, insofar as the initial response and students' comments are concerned. Furthermore, the students indicate that they believe entering speech contests is a good way to improve their English and that participating in the program had has had a positive affect on their confidence and level of English speaking and writing, illustrated by comments made by Student C, "We can talk with foreigners without embarrassment," Student L, "To speak English directly is very fun and we can learn more," and Student T, "Everyone can change their opinion. It helps people improve essay writing and speech giving skills".

The results show a high overall satisfaction with the program, but only moderate agreement that the students had enough contact time with the native teachers, shown by comments made by Student O, "I want to have much more time with the teachers," and Student V, "[I want] more contact time with teachers to 'feel' English." This suggests that the students want more time to prepare and would find extra sessions beneficial. These findings are supported by the indication that the students would recommend the program to their friends, that they want to enter more speech contests, and that they believe more students should join the program. However, some students showed concern that too many people would join the program and that this could dilute the benefits gained, e.g. Student E, "Now it's [good] enough but if more people join, each person will have less time, so it will not be as successful." Therefore, joining the program should be kept as a voluntary option as forcing unmotivated students to participate may disrupt the sessions or have a negative impact on the overall image of the program. This is supported by comments made by Student W, "If someone tells you to do something, it is effective, but if someone volunteers, the teacher can teach them nicely and it is more effective."

Based on the initial feedback, the format of the program sessions may need to be revised. When initially offered tutorials individually, in pairs or in small groups, the large majority opted for individual sessions. However, the data suggests

that their opinions have changed, with the most popular preferred structure reported being small groups. This could be explained by a feeling of group togetherness, students being able to support each other, provide peer feedback and become positive rivals, or a reduction of anxiety, noted in comments from Student C, "We can help each other and try hard together and feel a natural way to learn," Student M, "To speak English in small groups improves our English more. Small groups mean people can have rivals," and Student W, "Around eight people. I can be not too nervous and I can enjoy it."

However, while this class structure may be popular during the speech writing stage, Student A said, "One to one, slowly is best," and Student R said, "Some people are there so I can learn from them, but there's not a lot of opportunity to say my opinion," which suggests that it may not be practical when preparing the speech delivery as the students would not receive the same level of input as on an individual basis. These results imply that using a small group structure during the speech writing and early practice stages and then shifting to a one-to-one pattern when preparing for the final speech delivery would be appropriate.

It was mentioned that by being able to think about a topic in English, various areas of language skills were being enhanced in a number of different ways. Student M said that, "To think in English about a speech and to practice makes people improve," and Student S said that, "To speak English definitely improves English and also thinking about what to say in a speech helps us improve." Also students found that they were learning new vocabulary and grammar, e.g. Student I, "Learning words we don't learn in lessons," Student T, "To learn new grammar and vocabulary," and Student U, "If I hadn't joined the course, I wouldn't have learned lots of new vocabulary." It was also claimed that gaining extra contact time with native speakers helped to improve the students' English levels, illustrated by Student A, "Contact with the native teachers helps get English into our heads," and Student L, "I enjoyed it a lot because we could talk to English people and get their opinions." It can therefore be stated that the implementation of the speech program provided students with the opportunity to develop their English skills in

ways that were previously unavailable. Furthermore, it can be asserted that the new learning contexts have been perceived as beneficial by the participating students.

The participants found writing grammatically correct sentences most difficult, shown by Student D, "I didn't know how to make the most effective sentence," and Student R, "I couldn't explain in English something that I can explain in Japanese very well," but also indicated that this was an area they felt that they had improved, e.g. Student F, "I learned new grammar and vocabulary," and Student M, "What I thought was right, what I learned was incorrect, so it was good to learn the correct way to speak English." Another area of difficulty was pronunciation, illustrated by Student S, "Writing was difficult and intonation / stress was difficult," and Student W, "Writing words is OK, but pronouncing words was difficult." However, the students felt that they had also shown improvement in their pronunciation, e.g. Student B, "Pronunciation is a bit better," and Student M, "The teacher helped me to make the essay and with my pronunciation." It can therefore be stated that the program is addressing areas of language that students need help with and that the students perceive the program to be beneficial in developing their skills in these areas.

The comments regarding the reasons for joining the program showed that it provided the opportunity for students to express their opinions, shown by Student A, "I want to express my opinion," Student H, "To speak English and to tell people what I am thinking," and Student R, "It's a wonderful feeling to tell people what I am thinking," and that it was also a chance to prove to other students that they could speak English well, highlighted by Student P, "I want to prove to people who say I can't speak English that I can." The program therefore gives students a sense of achievement and pride, empowering them to develop their English in a context with a definite objective other than exams.

It is possible that, as the target of the program is not an exam, that the students' enjoyment of the program and therefore their perceptions of English in general were increased, seen in comments made by Student A, "I would love to have experience of lots of contests," Student D,

"It's a good experience," Student M, "To do the speech contest is fun and enjoyable," Student R, "To speak English is fun," and Student T, "It was good for me and fun". Studying a language in a positive and enjoyable environment can lead to increased motivation, the reduction of affective filters (Krashen, 1981), illustrated by Student C, "We can talk with foreigners without embarrassment," and can have a positive affect on the way students study in other subjects.

Conclusion

Irregardless of the students' actual performance in the speech contests, their entrance into an external speech preparation program has shown itself to be successful in many respects, particularly in giving students the chance to develop their English skills in an autonomous manner that they found enjoyable and rewarding. However, the structure of the program needs to be altered to take the students' stated preference for small group study into account, which would allow for peer feedback and their desire for more contact time with the native-speaker teachers.

As information regarding many speech contests is sent to schools as a matter of course, the primary requirement from teachers in establishing such a program is scheduling enough time to mentor and facilitate the students' work. This investment of time is amply rewarded by the efforts and many hours of autonomous work applied by the students, and we strongly encourage interested teachers to try implementing a similar program for themselves.

Appendices

The appendices are available from the online version of this article at <jalt-publications.org/tlt/issues/2012-03_36.2>.

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