Critical Thinking and Willingness to Communicate:
A Study of Japanese EFL High School Students through Debate Activities

The purpose of this present study is to explore changes in Japanese high school students’ way of thinking and willingness to communicate (WTC), in an EFL context, through debate activities. From my teaching-English experience, my belief is that students should find out the meaning of English learning by themselves, as this may lead to cultivating their individual autonomy in the future. To foster individual autonomy in students, it is crucially important for teachers, within the limited time and space available to them at school, to provide learners with opportunities to reflect upon and own the purpose and value of their learning.

If the purpose of English language learning is a vital part of our society’s preparations for the future, it is necessary for teachers to have certain perspectives of both ‘an individual’ and ‘society’ or the educational principles. To this end, teachers have to take into account students’ present EFL context as well as their future prospects, or the potential for lifelong learning, and thereby endeavor to reorganize the curriculum or the content for the better.

The two requisites are highlighted in this research: critical thinking (CT) and WTC. It is based on my belief that after high school graduation CT and WTC will become much more essential for learners who have to live out the society with the flood of information and diverse people in order to succeed as “an intercultural citizen.”

Through my observation of many students, they seem to be struggling with the gap between the reality (English learning for entrance examinations) and the ideal (one for communication with others). These circumstances led me to speculate about the meaning of ‘communication.’ Given their mental development stage and numerous current topics dealt with in entrance examinations, the content or quality of ‘communication’ should be valued more than ever. After deep contemplation of this, my conclusion was that it would be from the ‘debate’ that learners come to communicate in a real sense.

There are plenty of the existing literature and the voices from the classroom to suggest that debate activities are very useful for English language learning. However, one can safely say that many teachers are reluctant to introduce debate activities into their classrooms because they are not as yet certain about the effectiveness of debate activities. Thus this research also aims to prove the effects of debate activities and accordingly to provide them with its convincing evidence.

In Chapter 1, theoretical and conceptual perspectives relating to Japanese high school students are discussed. The first section explicates the overview on debate activities in Japan and the reasons why these are necessary for Japanese EFL high school students. After that the definition of CT used in this thesis, the relation between CT and debate activities, and the researches on CT through debate activities are stated. Thirdly, the conception of WTC is defined and the relation between WTC and debate activities is discussed quoting McIntyre, Clément, Dörney, & Noels’ WTC model (1998).

Chapter 2 starts with the two research questions: 1) How do CT and WTC of Japanese high school students change through debate activities?; 2) How do their perceptions for CT and WTC change among the groups.
with different self-expressing abilities through debate activities? To this end, a research design to capture the
effect of debate learning from various perspectives is
described employing mixed research methods with some
gradients. This means that the data elicitation and
analysis are carried out from a whole class into a few
groups with different self-expressing abilities into
individuals. In this process of multi-layered analysis, it is
expected to examine the tendency of subtle and dynamic
changes of the participants through debate activities. In
addition to this, the background of 31 student
participants, the questionnaire, and the pilot study dealt
with in the research are explained.

Chapter 3 comprises the data elicitation and
analysis of Study 1 and 2. This chapter responds to the
first research question. The salient feature of Study 1 is
to elucidate the changes of the whole class through
debate activities quantitatively. The data was collected
through the 37-item questionnaire and analyzed in factor
analysis. The findings here were as follows: the
participants seemed to develop learner autonomy in
their learning, rather than the tendency of English
learning for entrance examinations and anxiety for oral
communication. As a whole the tendency of CT was
strengthened. On the other hand, WTC was replaced by
English learning anxiety. Another exclusive state of
mind remained somehow, but became milder.

Study 2 was analyzed based on the descriptive data,
which was the open-ended part of the questionnaire.
Before debate activities, they appeared to focus their
English-learning efforts towards entrance examinations
only, irrespective of their strong wish to communicate
with others. They may have felt a gap between their wish
and reality. However, after debate activities, some
students greatly gained the dispositions of CT. Others
analyzed themselves from the perceptions of their
English abilities. Their general comments suggest that
CT of the whole class was enhanced, and through debate
activities, WTC of the participants was stimulated.
However, it was also observed that their language
anxiety was nevertheless increased.

Chapter 4 explicates Study 3 and 4, which found
the changes of the groups with different self-expressing
abilities, and represents this in terms of both quantitative
and qualitative data. In order to look into the changes of
some groups with different self-expressing abilities, the
speaking test and the writing test were held for the
participants. As a result, they were divided into three
clusters.

The findings gained from Study 3, which was the
comparison of factor score, as follows: 1) The changes of
the pre- and post-questionnaires were that Cluster 1 and
2 showed almost the same pattern of change though the
degree was different; 2) the participants of Cluster 1
were aware of CT consciously or unconsciously even
before debate activities; 3) Cluster 3 showed a negative
response to CT after debate learning; 4) Cluster 1 and 2
showed plus score for English learning anxiety, while
Cluster 3 showed minus score for it; and 5) Cluster 3
may have become exclusive for others’ opinion
perceiving struggling or frustration through interaction.

Study 4 is based on the data of the interview and
analyzed based upon the two perceptions, that is, CT and
WTC. Besides some common points, the findings from
the data were the following: 1) metacognition seemed to
be necessary for learning CT; 2) the learners who were
good at writing were more conscious about thinking
process than the ones who were good at speaking; and 3)
the gain score of WTC did not always correspond with
each learner’s change in the qualitative data. There
is room for further investigation about the gap between
the quantitative data and the qualitative one, and the relation
between WTC and language anxiety.

Finally, the thesis concludes with some
pedagogical implications for conducting debate activities
in the classroom and the meanings of English language
learning for students.