

Exploring perceived capacity to speak in silent English majors: A longitudinal study before, during, and after study abroad

Simon Humphries^{a,1,*}, Maiko Ikeda^{b,2}, Tomoko Yashima^{c,3}

^{a,b,c} Kansai University, Faculty of Foreign Language Studies, 3-3-35 Yamate-cho, Suita-shi, Osaka, Japan.

¹shumphri@kansai-u.ac.jp^{1,*}; ²miked@kansai-u.ac.jp; ³yashima@kansai-u.ac.jp



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ABSTRACT

In the Japanese classroom context, student silence is a widely observed phenomenon (King, 2013). As such, the volition to speak, which is central to willingness to communicate (WTC; MacIntyre et al., 1998), may be weak compared to other sociocultural and contextual factors (Humphries et al., 2023). Therefore, the authors focused on two silent university English majors' perceived capacity to speak (CTS). Using focused essay journals (MacIntyre et al., 2011), retrospective timeline graphs (Ikeda et al., 2020; Fukui & Yashima, 2021), and semi-structured interviews, the authors explored CTS fluctuations longitudinally before, during, and after a study abroad (SA) year. They analysed situational cues and characteristics (Rauthmann et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2018). Results indicated that both participants felt sensitive to and depended on their interlocutors' kindness, empathy and patience. Implications for supporting students before, during, and after SA are discussed.



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1. Introduction

Depending on the context, silence can be appropriate and necessary (Bao, 2023; King & Harumi, 2020). However, target language interaction is essential for second language acquisition (SLA) learner progress (Ellis, 1999; Gass, 2013; Long, 1996; Swain, 1995), and learners who fear making mistakes by speaking out can fall into a vicious circle where they fail to improve leading to continued silence (Umino, 2023). Moreover, many academic and professional opportunities can arise for users who speak effectively (Goh & Burns, 2012). As a result, willingness to communicate (WTC; MacIntyre et al., 1998) has been a widely researched concept for understanding factors that may encourage interaction. In East Asian classrooms, there may be a tendency toward speaking reticence that may prevent WTC for many learners (King, 2013; Wen & Clement, 2003); moreover, studies indicate learner silence may occur during moments of high WTC (Ducker, 2022; Peng, 2020). Therefore, “rather than assuming that the volition inherent in WTC should be the central aspect causing speech, we need to also account for whether L2 users feel speaking is actually possible” (Humphries et al., 2023, pp. 1-2). To account for L2 users’ perceptions of their abilities to speak under various situations, in this study, we focus on learners’ perceived capacity to speak (CTS; Humphries et al., 2015). Domestic sociocultural norms can impede speaking out (Wen & Clément, 2003); however, study abroad (SA) can provide language learners with a shift in context, culture and learning styles, which may lead to changes in CTS (Humphries et al., 2023). Therefore, we explored CTS fluctuations before,

during and after SA for two learners perceived as reticent pre-SA to understand the situational factors that influenced them.

2. A Review of Willingness to Communicate and Capacity to Speak

2.1. Willingness to communicate

Defined as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2” (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547), L2 WTC aims to indicate the likelihood of target language use. MacIntyre et al. (1998) outlined the concept as a heuristic pyramid model that depicts how trait and situated individual variables interact to produce L2 WTC.

Studies of L2 WTC during SA have included correlational design (D’Amico, 2012; Gallagher 2013; Liu, 2017; Robson, 2015a; 2015b), pre-post-test SA impact (De Poli et al., 2018; Dewaele et al., 2015; D. M. Kang, 2014; Lee, 2018; Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2008), and mixed method designs containing exploratory qualitative elements (Cao, 2011, 2013; Cao & Philp, 2006; Deng & Peng, 2021; S. J. Kang, 2005).

Qualitative and mixed-method situational WTC studies have focused on mostly East Asian learners in English as a second language (ESL) classes in the USA (S. J. Kang, 2005), New Zealand (Cao, 2011, 2013; Cao & Philp, 2006) and Canada (Deng & Peng, 2021) for durations of one semester or shorter using interviews, journals and/or stimulated recall. Three main factors seem to influence learners’ WTC in classroom situations during SA. Firstly, there are individual internal influences, such as the perceived opportunity to speak, personality, self-confidence and emotion (Cao, 2011) or feelings of excitement, responsibility and security (S. J. Kang, 2005). Secondly, these individual influences react to situational factors, including interlocutors, topic and context (S. J. Kang, 2005). Thirdly, linguistically, students’ limited L2 proficiency and reliance on their L1 are reported to influence their WTC during SA (Cao, 2011).

Situational WTC can fluctuate between lessons and between classroom activities (Cao, 2013). Deng and Peng (2021) tracked WTC changes and the causes among Chinese sojourning in Canada. The researchers discovered that participants’ awareness of classmates led them to conform by reducing participation to match reticent peers or by speaking out more like friends who lacked fear of mistakes. Their WTC also rose or fell based on their perception of inclusion/exclusion in a multilingual group that would not judge them negatively.

These qualitative and mixed-method investigations are necessary to shed light on the personal nature of SA experiences and learners’ potentially volatile emotional states (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2021). Understanding individual experiences is important because, for SA, differences may be amplified (Huebner, 1995) as sojourners develop new mindsets in response to new cultures and learning practices; therefore, longitudinal studies capturing fluctuations in different experiences are important (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). To date, L2 WTC studies have focused on short SA sojourns (one semester or less) and classroom influences. We should widen studies to encompass influences on speaking from outside the classroom and for longer durations.

2.2. Capacity to speak

Despite extensive research using the WTC construct, sociocultural situational factors in the East Asian context seem to inhibit the correlation with actual language output. Wen and Clément (2003) note that although Chinese learners may desire to communicate with a target person or group, sociocultural values from the classroom, such as perceived peer pressure and acquiescence to the teacher, may dampen WTC. Moreover, Peng (2020) found discrepancies between stated high levels of WTC and spoken output; for example, linguistically or cognitively capable Chinese students yearned to speak but stayed silent unless nominated for a turn. Ducker (2022) found similar results in the Japanese context. In an idiodynamic study in an English immersion class, he found almost no correlation between in-class WTC ratings and learner talk.

In the Japanese context, as in the case of Ducker (2022), silence has been widely observed (King, 2013). Scholars blame the predominance of teacher-fronted yakudoku (grammar-translation) instruction for entrance exams (Humphries & Burns, 2015), which reduces opportunities to speak the target language and demotivates learners (Falout et al., 2009). Moreover, learners’ hypersensitivity to negative evaluations from peers (King, 2013) may cause embarrassment and distress (Shachter et al.,

2022). For Japanese learners, the volition implied in WTC may be weak in relation to factors causing silence; therefore, we use the capacity to speak (CTS) concept: “students’ perceptions of their abilities to speak under various classroom situations” (Humphries et al., 2015, p. 165). CTS differs from the trait-oriented internal locus of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) in favour of “focusing on understanding situations when L2 users feel they can—or cannot speak well” (Humphries et al., 2023, p. 4).

Humphries and colleagues have explored CTS in secondary, tertiary, SA and extracurricular contexts. Humphries et al. (2020) surveyed classroom CTS in English and its underlying factors for 260 respondents in Japanese high schools. Results indicated that L2 confidence and classroom support directly influenced participants’ CTS. These two factors were supported by the use of English by others in the classroom and students’ experience outside class. To capture dynamic fluctuations in CTS longitudinally from broader contexts, Humphries et al. (2023) tracked CTS for two learners’ experiences using interviews, journals, retrospective line graphs and a questionnaire. Students’ CTS was dynamic and fluctuating as they faced and adapted to challenges from new situations and new types of interlocutors. Initial reasons for silence stemmed from linguistic limitations and hypersensitivity; however, after SA, they were capable but silent when surrounded by classmates using the L1. As noted by Humphries et al. (2023), we need more longitudinal studies to develop an integrated picture of the “ebbs and flows of CTS from pre- to post-SA” (p. 10). This study aims to add to this picture with voices from two comparatively reticent speakers and asks the following research questions:

1. How did participants’ perceptions of their L2 capacity to speak develop over time (before, during and after SA)?
2. What situational cues influenced participants’ L2 capacity to speak (before, during and after SA)?
3. What attractor states and changes occurred in participants’ L2 capacity to speak across the entire period (before, during and after SA)?

3. The Study

3.1. Context and Participants

The participants in this study were Japanese female English majors who attended a large, prestigious private university in the western area of Japan’s Honshu Island. They studied for a four-year undergraduate degree in a foreign language faculty containing a compulsory academic year overseas in their second year. They took English immersion academic skills courses during their first year to prepare them for SA. During SA, they took a coordinated programme that helped prepare them to specialise in areas related to their final two years. The five areas of specialisation were (a) intercultural communication, (b) area studies (e.g. American history or British literature and culture), (c) language education and communication (i.e. TESOL), (d) language analysis (i.e. linguistics), and (e) translation and interpreting. In contrast to the English immersion classes in their first year, after returning from SA, these specialised subjects were studied mostly in Japanese.

We collected data from six volunteers but eliminated two outliers with extensive experience studying and living abroad during their schooldays because we wanted to examine the impact of SA on the participants’ CTS. One outlier (“Kaho”) had lived in the USA for over three years where she attended a regular elementary school. The other outlier (“Maiko”) studied in New Zealand for 10 months during high school. From the remaining four volunteers, “Yumi” and “Kumi” (pseudonyms) reflected the most deeply on their experiences and reasons for their CTS changes; therefore, they were selected for an earlier publication (see Humphries et al., 2023). This current study focuses on the two students observed as the most silent among the volunteers in compulsory pre-SA academic English classes taught by the first and second authors. Before SA, based on TOEFL ITP scores, they were B2 level (upper intermediate) according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). They had studied English as a compulsory school subject for six years before entering university.

During SA in their second year, the first participant (pseudonym “Ruika”) studied at a large public university in a small rural town in the Midwest USA. The second participant (“Haru”) sojourned in a mid-sized university in the centre of a large city in central England. Both participants studied academic English in university-affiliated language centres with other international students during the spring

and summer. Subsequently, they achieved upper-B2 level, which qualified them for undergraduate content courses with local degree-seeking students in the autumn semester.

3.2. Data Collection

The first author interviewed the participants during the autumn undergraduate section of their SA and in January, one year after they returned. The interviews focused on data from CTS journals and retrospective timeline graphs. In their monthly journals, students used the focused essay technique (MacIntyre et al., 2011; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). They described moments during their sojourn when they could speak well (high CTS) and when they felt that they could not speak (low CTS). We encouraged them to consider the causes of their high and low CTS and their emotions during the incidents.

Retrospective timeline graphs can indicate changes in participants' feelings, and this approach has been used to track fluctuations in foreign language anxiety (Ikeda et al., 2020) and motivation (Carpenter et al., 2009; Chan et al., 2015; Fukui & Yashima, 2021). Immediately before the first interview, we asked participants to plot their CTS trajectory from their secondary school days (yearly), pre-SA university (semesterly), and SA (monthly). In other words, the timeline graphs become more fine-tuned closer to the present when their memories are fresher. Before the second interview, they plotted their monthly CTS for the remaining SA and the post-SA phase. These retrospective timeline graphs provided a visual structure for the interviewer to investigate perceived causes of high, low and changing CTS.

The participants had the option to translanguage between English and Japanese in the interviews and journals; however, they tended to communicate primarily in English.

3.3. Data analysis: Dynamic system model

Using a complex dynamic systems framework (Larsen-Freeman, 1997) and a longitudinal design, we can capture fluctuations and changes (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021) and search for stable attractor states (Hiver, 2015). We used the framework proposed by Zhang et al. (2018), which aims to explain the impact of situations on personality states using three levels of categorisation: classes, cues and characteristics (Rauthmann et al., 2015).

Situation classes describe types of situations (e.g., study or work situations), and situation cues refer to the physical elements that constitute a situation (e.g., interlocutors, tasks). Situation cues are the objective features of situations, whereas the processing of these objective features depends on how they are interpreted by individuals, and thus creates subjective perceptions of situations, i.e., situation characteristics (e.g., task-confidence, task-interest, and task-usefulness) (Zhang et al., 2018, p. 228).

In their meta-analysis of WTC studies, Zhang et al. (2018) concluded that situation characteristics are under-researched, and only S. J. Kang (2005) distinguished between cues and characteristics. While Zhang et al. (2018) focused on classroom WTC, we explored CTS including situations outside the classroom. Influences on WTC and speaking a target language outside a classroom have been under-researched (Humphries et al., 2023), but SA language experiences go beyond the classroom as sojourners deal with a variety of challenges in their daily interactions.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. CTS for the whole period

Haru and Ruika's overall CTS graphs increased before and during SA. They both sketched a flattening of their CTS after SA as they perceived fewer opportunities to speak in class. Ruika sketched a rollercoaster (Fig 1) that included negative sections of silence during her school days.

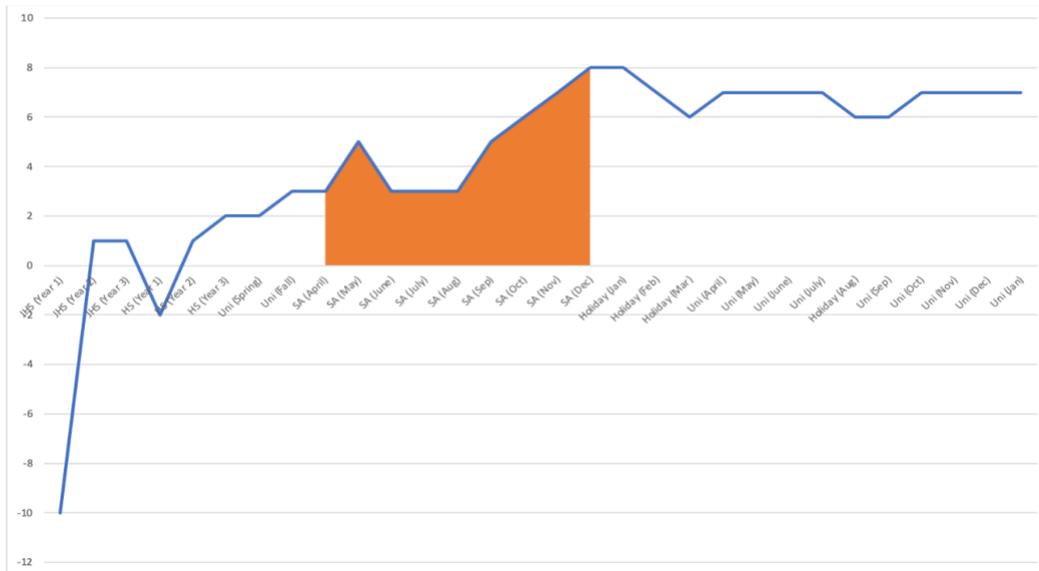


Fig. 1. Ruika's CTS graph

Note: Shaded section indicates the duration of the study abroad period.

In contrast to Ruika’s rollercoaster, Haru plotted a stable, gradual upward trajectory that was always positive. Despite this perception, interviews revealed that Haru faced dips in her CTS as she faced challenges in new situations.

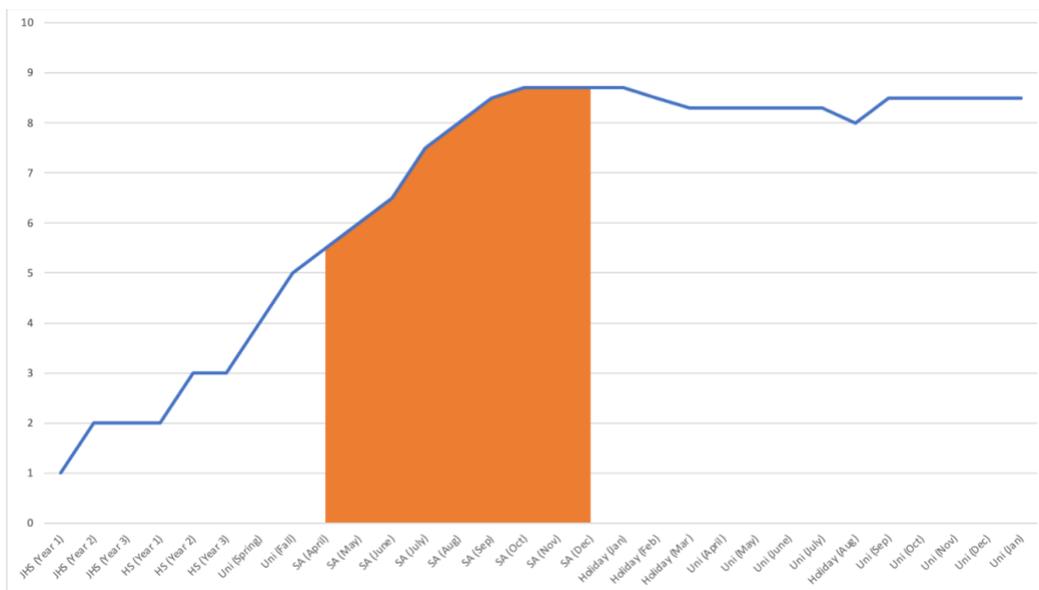


Fig. 2. Haru's CTS graph

Note: Shaded section indicates the duration of the study abroad period.

4.2. Before study abroad

Interviews with Ruika and Haru focused on three main contexts each before SA. They both discussed speaking experiences at their secondary schools and university. For Ruika, her cram schools improved her confidence (Table 1), while Haru’s perspectives changed during a two-week sojourn in Australia during her secondary school days (Table 2).

Ruika tended to discuss the influence of teachers on her attitude to English and, consequently, her CTS. Initially, she admitted, “I didn’t like English when I entered junior high school,” but her attitude changed when she began studying at a cram school one year later. She described the cram school teacher as “nice” and “I came to like English, and I started studying hard.” Although the cram school teacher taught “grammar reading writing” rather than speaking, Ruika felt her CTS increased from this linguistic knowledge development tailored individually, “[the cram school teacher] gave different assignments to each student.” Ruika’s preference for linguistic study to improve her CTS continued in her latter high school days. She attended a private high school affiliated with a university. Therefore, unlike regular high schools that prepare students for form-focused university entrance examinations (Humphries & Burns, 2015), her English classes had a range of speaking activities such as pair-work discussions, and “once a week we had [a] speech or presentation.” Although the high school speaking activities may have improved Ruika’s speaking confidence, she credited her CTS peak on studying “hard” in cram school to take entrance examinations for a non-affiliated university and this may have enabled her to cross a threshold linguistic foundation (Lafford & Collentine, 2006).

In addition to the cram school teacher, Ruika mentioned her secondary school teachers as a CTS factor. From one perspective, her CTS fell when she entered high school because “the teacher always looked for our mistake[s] so I was afraid of making [them] when I was speaking English.” In contrast, she had a teacher in her second year who boosted her CTS by using headsets in a language lab. Students were assigned random partners to discuss familiar topics such as “movies or families.” The teacher listened to some dialogues and corrected errors: “When I made a mistake, he sometimes point[ed] it [out].” Ruika did not elucidate why she had higher CTS when corrected by the language lab teacher. Perhaps he was gentler, but the headset use may have protected Ruika emotionally from exposure to negative evaluation by numerous peers (Shachter et al. 2022).

In contrast to her focus on teachers at the secondary level, Ruika noted the influence of classmates during her first year at university. She claimed that “all of them can speak English better than me ... I sometimes lost my confidence.” Therefore, her CTS was weakened due to hypersensitivity to others (King, 2013). However, she appreciated their considerate attitudes, “they are kind so I enjoy their class.” She noted overcoming the shock of interacting with an outgoing, sympathetic classmate: “I was really surprised but he really helped me.” Ruika did not outline why she was surprised by this kind classmate, but his attitude may have contrasted with her potential fear of negative evaluation by peers from her school days.

In another contrast to her secondary school recollections, Ruika credited plentiful speaking opportunities at university for increasing her CTS, “I had a lot of opportunity to speak English so my speaking skill is up after I entered [home] University.” In particular, Ruika seemed to benefit from a reading class where all students needed to speak in English, “when we have a discussion, each person has to say something at least one time.” All students would receive more assignments if one person stayed silent, so it encouraged a collaborative speaking atmosphere with a push toward engagement (Shea, 2017).

Table 1. Ruika’s CTS cues and psychological characteristics (pre-SA)

Class	Cue	Characteristic
School	Noticing mistakes	Afraid in front of others (without headphones)
Cram school	Individual instruction	Felt security from the kindness of teacher
	Grammar practice	Aligned with intellectual goals
University	High-level kind classmates	Hypersensitivity: Inferiority vs sociality
	Compulsory opportunities	Positivity

Unlike Ruika, Haru had no communicative speaking activities in her school days but felt confident. Partially, her confidence began from attending a small private English conversation class during her final year of primary school. Subsequently, Haru continuously qualified for the advanced English class for six years at secondary school. This class was “test preparation like focused on ... more advanced grammar.” Although a non-Japanese assistant language teacher (ALT) attended every week, they had no conversations. Instead, ALT-based activities were passive listening activities that she claimed were “same as the Japanese teachers.” Speaking activities were mechanical without creative language use, “I memorised the text of the book and [spoke it to] my partner without looking at the

textbook.” A focus on mechanical activities has been observed as part of the yakudoku (grammar-translation) method in studies of secondary-level English classes in Japan (Humphries & Burns, 2015).

Table 2. Haru’s CTS cues and psychological characteristics (pre-SA)

Class	Cue	Characteristic
School	Mechanical activities	Confident: Memorised and spoke
Australian homestay	Conversations	CTS fluctuated based on understanding the interlocutor
University	Textbook discussion	Upset: Unsure of opinion
	Whole class	Shy to raise hand: Knew the answer
	Presentation	Easier: Read notes

Although Haru did not experience communicative classroom activities, she had opportunities to speak with non-Japanese L1 and L2 English speakers. She joined a “summer international camp” and “talked with Hawaiian international students” in Japan. Moreover, Haru sojourned for two weeks in an Australian homestay. She understood her Australian host family, who spoke more slowly, but had difficulty communicating with an L2 English housemate “from Dubai [because] his English was a little difficult to understand.” Overall, this short SA experience changed her life goals from becoming a teacher domestically to wanting to live overseas: “I thought that I wanted to study abroad and if I can, I wanted to work abroad.” This new ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, 2005) encouraged her to apply to a university with a study abroad programme.

When Haru entered university, she described a reduction in her CTS: “There is a lot of speaking class and at the first time, I was really upset, so, erm, I couldn’t speak a lot.” Haru claimed to understand the class content linguistically and gained confidence from high test scores for IELTS and TOEIC. Higher spontaneity in the activities tended to reduce her participation. Haru indicated that she stayed silent during textbook discussions: “I was not accustomed to speak[ing] my opinion in English.” Moreover, she felt reticent to volunteer answers, “when I had to just [put my] hand up, I couldn’t,” due to shyness. In contrast, like Ruika, Haru had higher CTS during activities where “everyone has to say something.” In particular, prepared presentations led to higher CTS: “it was easier than do[ing] hand[s] up, but I always read my notes.” These phenomena where speaking out is compulsory, but students are given time to prepare have been shown elsewhere to improve Japanese students’ CTS (Humphries et al., 2015).

4.3. During study abroad

During SA, both participants faced challenges in expressing themselves. Particularly, changes in English use circumstances influenced their CTS. While they faced the strongest challenges during undergraduate content classes, Ruika had success speaking with friends outside class (Table 3), and Haru thrived when asked about Japan (Table 4).

Table 3. Ruika’s CTS cues and psychological characteristics (during SA)

Class	Cue	Characteristic
Extracurricular	Individual (no Japanese)	Make friends: Sociality
	Shared interests	
	Receptive L1 listeners	Fluctuates: Kindness vs pronunciation
ESL class	Proficient speakers	Fluctuating CTS: Inferiority
Undergrad classes	Teacher sensitivity	Hypersensitivity: Teacher adaptation to non-US
	Groupwork	High CTS: Share opinion

In Ruika’s graph (Fig 1), she sketched that her CTS increased at the beginning of her SA (March-April), followed by a decrease during the summer holidays (May-July) but finishing with an increase from August through to the end of her sojourn in December. The increases in CTS occurred when students were on campus. Initially, in March and April, she had Vietnamese friends who assisted her: “most of them have stayed here for a long time, so I ask[ed] them how to study English.” She also joined societies such as the Asian American Union and African Drum Club. During the summer holiday, her CTS fell: “Local students went to their home; they didn’t have class here, so I didn’t have the opportunity to talk with [them].” During this period, Ruika travelled in the USA with students

from her home university and they talked in their L1: “we speak a lot of Japanese ... it didn’t help [create the] opportunity to speak English.” When the local students returned for the new semester in August, Ruika enjoyed communicating with them: “I made a lot of new friends and I [spoke] English a lot.”

In addition to the trends indicated in the graph, Ruika’s CTS fluctuated based on her sensitivity to the interlocutors, such as their kindness and her perception of their attitude to her English proficiency.

Ruika described herself as introverted. Although this characteristic could impede her CTS potentially, Ruika felt the opposite:

I do not like act as a group, but this gives me good effect. When I went to an event by myself, many foreign people came to talk to me and I got [the] opportunity to speak English. However, my friends who went there as a group continued talking in Japanese.

Therefore, it is ironic that, although she could appear non-communicative among fellow Japanese, this outsider tendency helped her to make friends with individuals from different nationalities. Despite her aversion to spending time in groups socially, Ruika mentioned that she could participate well during some class discussions in a Chinese Ethics class: “It was good for me to express my opinion.” She could talk more easily in class-based discussion groups: “When I hang out, I don’t like going with a lot of people, but when in the class, group working is OK.” Her CTS in class improved as her relationships developed with peers: “After I made friends, it became easier to speak in class.”

Ruika increased her CTS by developing shared interests in topics. As mentioned, she joined an African Drum Club because she “was planning to start studying [a] new instrument” and liked Nigerian fashion. In this club, “I could make a lot of friends, so I had a lot of opportunities to speak English.” Students also spoke to Ruika due to their interest in Japan or Japanese culture. In the Asian American Union, they talked about “music, food and so on” and asked her about Japanese anime. Moreover, when the semester began in August, Ruika had roommates who “have been to Japan and they love Japan,” so they would “talk about Japanese culture.” They went downtown together, and Ruika said: “They love talking, so they’re always talking to me, so I can get a lot of opportunities to use English.”

Like during her pre-SA experiences, Ruika felt sensitive regarding how others perceived her English speaking. During the summer, she wrote in her journal:

When I talk with people whose mother tongue is English, I feel comfortable because they always say “Your mother tongue is not English, so don’t mind if you cannot speak well. It is natural that we can speak better than you because our mother tongue is English!” On the other hand, when I have to speak in front of international students, ... I feel nervous because they speak English much better than I although their mother tongue is not English.

When asked during the interview in November if her CTS with international students had increased, she agreed, but qualified that she still felt nervous when they spoke English proficiently. In contrast, when she spoke with L1 English speakers, Ruika worried about their comprehension: “Before I came here [the USA], I didn’t worry about pronunciation, but after I came here, native students sometimes don’t understand my pronunciation.” Her CTS increased with empathetic L1 speakers who were “friendly and kind.”

Like her schooldays, Ruika felt it was important for teachers to show understanding. She took an undergraduate course in American history, where “the teacher says I’m [the] first international student for him.” Ruika struggled in his class, saying that he did not “know how to communicate with international students, so it’s kind of hard for me to ask him questions.” In contrast, her Chinese Ethics professor boosted Ruika’s confidence because he supported international students who made mistakes and told them that language errors would not lead to lower grades. The overall class dynamics also influenced her CTS. The Chinese Ethics professor encouraged small group discussions. In contrast, other professors used a lecture style: “[In the] American history class and African culture class, there were too many students, and their [teaching] style is the teacher is always talking, and we are just listening.”

Unlike Ruika, Haru sketched a stable improvement in her CTS graph during SA (Fig 2); however, during the interviews, it became clear that she faced some setbacks when new courses started. The SA programme was structured into three seasonal phases: (spring) language courses with international

students on short courses; (summer) pre-sessional studying business communication with international students preparing for master's degrees; and (autumn) semester taking undergraduate content courses with local or international students. In her journal entries in the spring, Haru frequently wrote that she did "not feel nervous very much"; instead, she highlighted her lack of confidence in her opinions and content knowledge. In the interview, she explained her difficulty switching between languages: "I couldn't come up with my opinion, I couldn't translate Japanese to English suddenly." She improved as she became accustomed to the classes but then faced difficulty in the Pre-sessional due to the new content and terminology. She wrote, "I cannot say my opinion much ... because I don't have any knowledge of business." In the interview, she explained how her peers seemed more advanced, "other students speak critically and analytically but I couldn't do that." Like in the spring, Haru adapted. She "asked [for] help [from her] grandfather and friend in Japan" and succeeded in a 15-minute pairwork speaking assignment because she prepared: "I had studied before the test."

During the undergraduate semester, Haru felt confident taking four "in-sessional" content classes with international students, but her CTS dipped in her two courses with local degree-seeking students. When interviewed in England, Haru indicated she was silent: "I couldn't speak my opinion in the seminar ... just sitting and listening to other students' opinion[s]." Partly, this was due to incomprehension because she said in the interview that she only understood 30% of their speaking. She also indicated her incomprehension in her journal: "other students really speak fast in seminars. Since I have not got used to the speed of speaking of the youth yet, I ask them to repeat ... several times." Haru felt that her thoughts were inadequate, "other students are very analytical and critical. So, I could not tell my opinion enough. I was disappointed again with my superficial thought." Haru said in her second interview that despite these issues, "most students [of our university] should take undergraduate course[s] to study English." She adapted through support from British friends and improved her CTS: "So now I'm accustomed to speaking English in front of the British people or American people, native speakers."

Overall, three cues emerged that influenced Haru's CTS: (a) discussions, (b) presentations, and (c) responding to others (Table 4).

Table 4. Haru's CTS cues and psychological characteristics (during SA)

Class	Cue	Characteristic
Classroom (ESL & undergrad)	Activity (discussion)	Time pressure: Formulating/translating ideas/opinions New content: Lack of understanding Other students' speed/opinions: Intimidating
	Activity (presentation)	Confident and nervous
Extracurricular	Responding to others	Higher CTS talking about Japan than other private topics
Classroom	Responding to others	Higher CTS responding to others taking initiatives

During classroom discussions (both with international students and local undergraduates), Haru tended to be silent when she felt pressured to respond spontaneously. She struggled to formulate ideas as she tried translating them in real-time. This problem was compounded when the content was new, and she struggled to understand terminology and concepts. In contrast, her CTS was higher for presentations because she could prepare. In her journal, Haru highlighted that she "had practised with teachers" and "had been given feedback from them." Therefore, the nerves caused by her first "presentation in English in front of many people who are not Japanese" were outweighed by her confidence from preparation.

Haru indicated that she tended to respond to questions rather than instigate conversations. Therefore, her interlocutors tended to control whether she spoke or stayed silent. For example, in her journal, she described a perceived difference between Japanese and some Russians she encountered:

Most Japanese tend to answer the questions rather than introduce ourselves on our own initiative at first. On the other hand, they [Russians] spoke very much about themselves to communicate rather than asking questions. So, I just listened to them and was disoriented.

In contrast to this group of Russian students, Haru frequently mentioned speaking well with people who were interested in Japan and Japanese people. In her journals and first interview, she noted a high CTS with Chinese friends "because they're interested in Japanese culture, so we can talk about Japanese anime and cartoons." Haru preferred this questioning to personal questions or small talk she

received from British people, such as, “How was your weekend?” Over time, Haru improved her CTS with other nationalities, such as Germans and British, and developed close friendships with two people from Somalia and Bangladesh who helped her in her undergraduate classes.

4.4. Post study abroad

After SA, Ruika’s CTS stayed fairly stable and higher than before her overseas sojourn (Fig 1 and Table 5). When asked about her confidence in speaking to Japanese classmates in English, Ruika noted an improvement: “compare[d] with before I went to [host university], I think I can have confidence” but added the caveat, “I sometimes care about mistakes.”

Table 5. Ruika’s CTS cues and psychological characteristics (after SA)

Class	Cue	Characteristic
Classroom	Discussion	Higher CTS than pre-SA, but still sensitive
	Professor	CTS mirrors teacher use
Extra-curricular	Frequency of opportunities	Frequency level = CTS level

Regarding the circumstances of speaking after SA, Ruika claimed, “I don’t have many opportunities.” However, deeper questioning revealed that she had many English presentations and felt that language use depended on the professors: “We seldom speak Japanese, but I think if the professor speaks [s] in English, we tend to use English.”

Outside classes, Ruika’s CTS fluctuated. During the holidays, her CTS fell: “I didn’t have [the] opportunity to speak English, so I think my speaking skill is down,” but she listened to “English news radio, every day.” She maintained contact with SA friends daily in English through text messaging. Ruika had higher CTS when she worked part-time in a hotel. She explained, “There are a lot of foreigners, so I can have many opportunities to communicate in English.” She expected to continue using English professionally in the future as she was applying to pharmaceutical companies that “export or import medicine from overseas.”

Like Ruika, Haru also had a highly stable but flat CTS after SA (Fig 2 and Table 6). She also maintained contact with her SA friends through text messaging using social media apps but had limited opportunities: “I [have] no chance to speak English with friends.” She felt that her classes lacked any challenge: “I just need to ... memorise a bit and tell [the audience] what I thought so it’s not so hard.” Classes were not interactive: “no debates, just presentations.” Haru wanted classes where students could discuss ideas in small groups before a compulsory whole class sharing stage: “first group discussion and after that speaking in front of all students.” The initial group discussion would help to “share our opinion[s] ... nice to relax,” but without the requirement to report to the whole class, she said, “We cannot practise speaking English” because students use Japanese. She seemed silent but desired the teacher to force her and other students to speak English (Peng, 2020; Wei & Cao, 2021).

Table 6. CTS cues and psychological characteristics (after SA)

Class	Cue	Characteristic
Extra-curricular	SA friend	Limited to text interaction
Classroom	Presentation	Too easy (flat CTS)
	No discussion	No practice (flat CTS)

4.5. CTS attractor states and fluctuations

Both Ruika and Haru shared a similar attractor state that remained stable from schooldays through to post-SA: They both shared sensitivity to the behaviour of interlocutors for their CTS. They both had higher CTS with interlocutors who showed sincere interest in them and, for example, asked them about Japanese culture. The participants also seemed to depend on their interlocutors to help them overcome their anxiety. Ruika felt insecure about her pronunciation; therefore, she appreciated empathetic and kind teachers, classmates and friends. Haru faced comprehension difficulties and struggled to express her opinion, but these problems seemed to weaken as she adjusted to her interlocutors and grew in confidence.

The experiences of Ruika and Haru highlight the impact of cultural differences on language learning and class participation, as well as the potential for personal growth and adaptation. Ruika appeared uncomfortable speaking during classes pre-SA. She stayed silent during discussions in small groups and stated in interviews that she worried her classmates were more proficient. Her reluctance to join groups of Japanese turned into an advantage as she made friends with other nationalities and became comfortable sharing her opinion during group work in American classes. In the case of Haru, her most notable change came from her attitude to classroom activities. Following form-focused activities at school, Haru adapted faster to giving presentations when she entered university because she had time to formulate her ideas. In contrast, she had lower CTS in discussions due to pressure for spontaneous interaction. During the post-SA phase, her attitude changed as presentations seemed too easy, and she wanted the challenge from discussions. This finding aligns with Allen (2021), where participants chose courses that were facilitated by an L1 English speaker and who had planned more interactive-based learning.

The present study employed the same research methodology as Humphries et al. (2023), using participants considered silent based on pre-SA classes. In a similar vein to Kumi and Yumi, who participated in the study by Humphries et al. (2023), Haru experienced mechanical activities at secondary school that hindered her CTS when she encountered spontaneous conversations at her home university (pre-SA) and during the sojourn. Ruika's main similarity was her sensitivity to making mistakes. However, during SA, Kumi and Yumi realised that other L2 users made mistakes and developed proactive speaking strategies that continued when they returned to Japan as they sought out international students. Although Ruika benefitted from meeting non-Japanese people in her part-time job, she and Haru could have benefitted from meeting international students on campus or online. All four participants experienced small dips in CTS during the post-SA phase that remained stable as they became more comfortable using English than before SA. Post-SA in the classroom, all four participants had low CTS when classmates refrained from using the target language. They needed activities to engage them actively in the L2.

5. Conclusion

L2 English silence among East Asian learners can commonly occur even during reportedly high WTC (Ducker, 2022; Peng, 2020). We therefore investigated learners' capacity to speak (CTS) rather than their willingness. As domestic sociocultural norms may impede speaking out (Wen & Clément, 2003), overseas sojourns may expose learners to new perspectives leading to increased CTS. To date, only Humphries et al. (2023) explored learners before, during and after SA for fluctuations in CTS. While they focused on participants who reflected deeply on their CTS fluctuations, this current study concentrated on two learners observed as silent during classes from the pre-SA phase.

Findings indicated that the learners' CTS trajectory was dynamic rather than linear. Overall, CTS increased, but it plateaued in the post-SA phase. While other studies have noted this plateau where speaking fluency ceases to increase during SA (Huensch & Tracy-Ventura, 2017; Llanes & Serrano, 2011; Robson, 2015b), our participants blamed the lack of post-SA opportunities to use English (Allen, 2021). In countries such as Japan, where English is not the first language, there are scant opportunities to speak this target language authentically. In their home university EFL context, we recommend, for example, encouraging returning students to join activities to support international students. However, on campuses with few international students, teachers should encourage English immersion classes containing opportunities for students to talk in groups and to present their findings.

Before university, the participants developed linguistic foundations during their secondary education and cram schools. At university, however, they faced speaking uncertainty, which persisted to an extent during SA. Students would benefit from more communicative speaking activities and interaction with non-Japanese in their school days. However, the emphasis remains on teaching for entrance exams lacking spoken assessment (Humphries & Burns, 2015), so pre-SA preparation courses should try to bridge the gap with carefully structured activities that account for student anxiety while encouraging more peer-peer spoken interaction (Yashima et al., 2018).

During SA, it was notable that the participants had their highest CTS with interlocutors interested in Japan or Japanese culture. To help sojourners settle at a host university, coordinators can recruit local language majors or members of societies affiliated to the inbound students' region. These

volunteers can be buddies or tandem language learning partners and help overcome initial CTS difficulties.

After returning from their sojourns, students value activities encouraging them to reflect on their SA experiences (Allen, 2021). Therefore, discussions focusing on intercultural awareness between Japan and their host countries can encourage topic-sensitive students like Haru and Ruika to speak out. This awareness can be increased further if learners participate in experiential learning involving actual interactions with L1 and L2 English speakers in Japan (Allen, 2022). We also recommend project-based learning as students can apply their target language to research and discuss themes that interest them (Humphries, 2023).

As this study contains a small focused sample and relies on recollections, we cannot generalise the results and participants' memories may be slanted. Still, as each person's SA experience is unique and may contain life-changing experiences, we recommend more longitudinal studies to capture fluctuations from pre-SA through to post-SA phases in different contexts. In particular, future studies could include observational data capturing dynamic changes between silence and speaking with retrospective interviews/journals to understand CTS fluctuations.

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