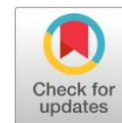


# Using inner speech checklists to nurture L2 discussion task fluency: Reactions from within Japanese university classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how inner speech practice, facilitated by checklists, can be used to nurture the English discussion fluency of Japanese university students, addressing challenges posed by silence in Japanese classrooms (Harumi, 2023; King, 2013a; Stroud, 2017a). Integrating innovative methods to enhance cognitive and utterance fluency, the study utilizes checklists centered on speech acts for silent mental rehearsal, self-assessment, and discussion task fluency development. Positive student responses reveal motivation, increased confidence, and a desire for future checklist use. However, nuanced perspectives underscore the necessity for further investigation. The study highlights the efficacy of checklists in improving English proficiency, self-assessment, and sentence creation, fostering interaction. However, students' preferences for more guidance, freedom, practice, adaptable difficulty, writing activities, and increased interaction time offer avenues for instructional refinement. Pioneering an integrative inner speech checklist approach, this study contributes to the discourse on spoken task fluency in Second Language Acquisition (SLA).



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## 1. Introduction

Silence in Japanese university second language classes poses a significant challenge (King, 2013a), influenced by cognitive processing demands and stress (Skehan, 1998, p. 99), cultural and social rules impacting students' decisions to participate (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Littlewood, 1999; Yashima et al., 2018), fear of spoken errors (Ehrman & Dornyei, 1998; Greer, 2000), and limited planning time (Stroud, 2014). Hesitation in articulating ideas fluently within discussions can hinder overall learning and impede the development of spoken English communication competence (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2013; Savignon, 2002). Reduced interactions also pose challenges for feedback provision and spoken English assessment.

This study addresses the research gap concerning whether silent language practices during discussions contribute to Japanese students' proficiency. Prior research suggests the potential benefits of private language practice for interactive tasks (Tomlinson & Avila, 2007, p. 83), although the relationship between silence and output remains intricate in second language acquisition discourse (Bao, 2023a, p. 31). The study employs an innovative approach, utilizing students' inner speech to practice speech acts and enhance cognitive fluency, utterance fluency, and discussion task fluency. Students engage in focused 'On-Task Silence' periods (Harumi, 2020) with timed inner speech

practices (Guerrero, 2017) as a mental muscle-training method to expedite idea generation, English formulation, and verbal expression. As mental processes are unobservable, student self-reported data is utilized to explore the potential impact and implications of this approach on nurturing discussion task fluency over time.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Defining discussion task fluency

In this study, 'discussion task fluency' is integral to second language tasks, encompassing the speed, smoothness, and effectiveness of spoken communication (Skehan, 2009). Speed, as a component, focuses on how rapidly individuals articulate thoughts and ideas in discussions for better understanding (Sangarun, 2005; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Verbal contributions must be delivered seamlessly to be considered fluent, devoid of pauses, fillers ('er' or 'um'), and the need for repetition or repair (Bygate, 1996; Mehnert, 1998).

Issues like pauses and speech repairs negatively impact discussion task fluency and are undesirable in this study. Recent research combines fluency measures into 'Utterance Fluency,' examining the overall flow and speed of articulation after mental formulation (Bao, 2023a; Skehan, 2003; Tavakoli & Skehan, 2005). Discussion task fluency, as used here, specifically refers to students' utterance fluency in second-language discussions—essentially, how easily and quickly they can verbalize thoughts without pauses, repetitions, or repairs.

### 2.2. Discussion task fluency and SLA

With a clarified definition of discussion task fluency, exploring its significance in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is crucial. Ellis (2003, p. 178) emphasizes that language learners must move beyond understanding input to actively produce unknown language forms, highlighting the importance of articulating thoughts as an essential aspect of language mastery (Swain, 2005). Practicing the cycle of conceptualizing, formulating, and articulating a second language enhances fluency and language usage (De bot, 1992; Kormos, 2014; Levelt, 1989).

Moreover, the ability to articulate ideas fluently in interactive settings, such as discussions, aligns with the interactionist viewpoint of language acquisition. Meaningful and functional dialogue in an interactive context fosters 'authentic' language use, contributing to enhanced language proficiency over time (Gass & Mackey, 2007; Gass & Varonis, 1994; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2013; Savignon, 2002). Consequently, the focus on improving students' discussion task fluency holds excellent relevance in SLA, aligning with the study's primary objective.

### 2.3. Silence during discussions in Japan

Understanding L2 student silence in discussions is intricate. While articulation enhances SLA, silence is not uniformly negative. Listening or silent reflection during discussions is considered 'On-Task Silence' or 'Positive Silence,' fostering fluency by facilitating thoughtful formulation, such as preparing to disagree (Bao & Ye, 2020; King, 2013b). Silence can be productive for fluency. Conversely, unproductive silence may stem from anxiety, lack of confidence, or avoidance, termed 'Off-Task Silence' (Cao & Philp, 2006; Jones, 1999; Stroud, 2017a).

Distinguishing 'On-Task' from 'Off-Task' Silence challenges language teachers, lacking observable cues for its impact. Excessive silence diminishes discussion time, conflicting with the study's interactionist focus on increased L2 interactions for enhanced SLA. Rather than scrutinizing discussion task silence, this study, detailed in the methodology section, explores how strategic silence outside discussions may support fluency during discussion time.

This study delves into silence within Japanese University classrooms, where students initiate as little as one percent of speech during class (King, 2013a). Understanding this silence is crucial for addressing it and supporting student fluency. Japanese students, often labeled as 'culturally pre-set' or 'stereotypical,' exhibit varied reasons for silence, from politeness to avoiding errors (Cheng, 2000; Kumaravadivelu, 2007; Takahashi, 2021). Studies explore the cultural and social rules influencing Japanese students' silence (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; King, 2013a; Yashima, et al., 2018). Notably, silence serves as a perfectionist strategy to evade speech errors and save face (Ehrman & Dornyei, 1998; Greer, 2000; Harumi, 2023). To foster discussion task fluency, strategies addressing the fear of errors among Japanese students will be discussed.

## 2.4. Strategies for increasing discussion task fluency in Japan

The fear of making errors significantly influences Japanese students' decision to participate in discussions (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998). Expressing opinions in a second language imposes a cognitive load, especially for low-level students (De Bot, 1992; Kormos, 2014; Levelt, 1989). Working memory plays a vital role, allowing students to retain language in short-term memory for more fluent participation (Bui, 2014; Jamalifar & Salehi, 2017). Written planning, using diaries for preparation, has shown positive effects on fluency by helping students formulate thoughts (Guerrero, 2004; Stroud, 2019). However, challenges include consuming class time and resulting in mechanical discussions (Stroud, 2017a).

Rehearsal, whether through mental simulation or verbal practice, contributes to faster and more fluent speech with fewer repairs (Guerrero, 2005; Tomlinson, 2000). Shadowing or responding verbally to listened speech aids fluency (Ohta, 2001). Rehearsing discussion topics, as observed in Japanese university students, improves subsequent group discussion fluency (Stroud, 2019). Despite their benefits, written planning and rehearsal are tailored for individual discussions, lacking evidence of transferability.

This study focuses on a strategy to prepare students for diverse discussion contexts over time, aiming to enhance discussion task fluency consistently across topics. The methodology for implementing this approach will be detailed later in the paper.

## 2.5. Inner speech practices for discussions

Rehearsing speech before discussions positively impacts fluency, and inner speech serves as a valuable strategy for practicing language conceptualization and formulation (Guerrero, 1991, 2005; Harumi, 2010). Inner speech, or private speech, enables students to engage in "mental rehearsal" for reflective or interpretive tasks, fostering language improvement during silent periods (Bao, 2020). Learning a new language involves using language covertly for personal thinking and self-communication (Guerrero, 2017).

Encouraging students to talk to themselves silently in the target language during silent periods aids in language proficiency and cognitive organization (Tomlinson, 2020). Studies support the positive impact of inner speech on learning another language, enhancing verbal communication and helping students mentally prepare for discussions (Appel & Lantolf, 1994; Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2020). Inner speech offers a way to rehearse and prepare for conversation without concerns about errors, benefiting students who fear making mistakes during discussions (Bao, 2023b; Tomlinson, 2000).

The interplay between inner speech and language output suggests that nurturing the inner voice can build second language (L2) output, contributing to cognitive fluency (Bao, 2023b; Tomlinson, 2001, 2003). Developing cognitive fluency, defined as the speed and smoothness of internal rehearsal of L2 speech, is crucial for enhancing utterance fluency within discussions (Bao, 2023b; Skehan, 2003; Tavakoli & Skehan, 2005). This study focuses on strategies to develop discussion task fluency by emphasizing inner speech, aiming to facilitate the transition from inner speech to external speech during discussions. The specific approach for developing cognitive fluency will be explored further in the methodology section.

## 2.6. Inner speech checklists for discussions

To enhance cognitive fluency and subsequent utterance fluency through inner speech practice, students benefit from a conducive environment for silent reflection (Bao, 2023b). Employing checklists as a humanistic strategy facilitates silent individual cognitive fluency improvement in discussions (Bao, 2023a, p. 97). This approach accommodates students who thrive on silent reflection before task engagement.

Checklists contribute to self-assessment, allowing students to transparently gauge their inner speech performance using rubrics (Reynolds-Keefer, 2010; Schamber & Mahoney, 2006). Self-assessment within oral tasks has demonstrated enhanced student participation over time (Dallimore et al., 2008). Raising students' awareness of specific language aspects crucial for interactive tasks, such as discussions, promotes improved participation and fluency (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 28; Stroud, 2017b, 2021). Clarity in expectations aids students in self-regulating their learning and improving performance across tasks (Panadero et al., 2012).

For inner speech checklists in discussions, a focus on speech acts, such as giving opinions, providing reasons, asking questions, and agreeing or disagreeing, proves effective (Stroud, 2017a). Unlike traditional grammar or vocabulary assessments, this approach empowers students to autonomously assess aspects within their grasp, fostering improvement over time. This study adopts a similar approach, utilizing inner speech checklists to support discussion task fluency and will elaborate on this in the subsequent sections.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research questions

The study aimed to address two key research questions:

RQ1: How do Japanese university students perceive the usefulness of Inner Speech Checklists for enhancing their performance in English discussions over a six-week period?

RQ2: In what ways do students express a desire for improvement in the checklists?

#### 3.2. Study participants

A total of 131 first-year Japanese students (60 male, 53 female) from the Faculty of Economics at a Tokyo university participated. They attended four English communication classes weekly, each lasting 100 minutes, over 14 weeks. English proficiency scores were unavailable, but classroom observations indicated a generally low level of spoken fluency. During initial interactions, most students struggled to articulate more than a sentence or two.

#### 3.3. Inner speech checklist design and procedure

The study involved six weekly English communication classes, with students using Inner Speech Checklists (see Appendix A). Checklists were administered in pairs at the start and end of every two classes, allowing self-assessment of inner speech abilities. Each checklist comprised ten rows, with phrases related to three types of speech acts (making suggestions, clarifying ideas, and supporting/criticizing ideas). Phrases were selected based on teacher input and aligned with the expected spoken sentences in the week 7 test. Students practiced combining each phrase with a context within three minutes to enhance cognitive fluency. No formal assessment of grammar or vocabulary was required.

Students were not obliged to share their scores but were encouraged to verbalize practiced sentences with a partner after completing the checklists. The NOW checklists (classes 1, 3, and 5) aimed to prepare students for improved performance in the counter-balanced LATER checklists (classes 2, 4, and 6), with two full classes of phrase-related practices provided for each checklist. In week 7, a group discussion test evaluated students' performance based on suggestions, clarifications, supports, and criticisms, all connected to the inner speech checklists practiced in weeks 1-6.

#### 3.4. Data collection and analysis

Following the week 7 test, students completed a three-part survey in Japanese, assessing the usefulness of inner speech checklists (see Appendix B for an English version). Part one comprised closed-ended questions related to ease, enjoyment, motivation, understanding weak areas, confidence improvement, perceived improvement, and test preparedness (addressing RQ1). Part two featured an open-ended question on reasons for wanting or not wanting to use the checklists in the future (addressing RQ1), while part three sought open-ended suggestions for checklist improvement in future classes (addressing RQ2). Survey responses were summarized in a table (part one) and analyzed thematically for parts two and three.

### 4. Findings and Discussion

Below is a summary and discussion of the data collected from the student survey. A discussion of each table is given.

The results from Tables 1 and 2 indicate a generally positive response from students regarding the use of checklists in their language learning experience. Table 1 reveals that students felt well-

supported by the checklists, perceiving them as motivational tools. The positive sentiments expressed in this table suggest that students found value and encouragement in the checklist approach.

Table 1. Student Self-Reported Feelings Towards the Checklists (N=113)

The checklists...	Mean	Standard Deviation
...were easy for me to use.	5.29	0.80
...were fun for me to use.	4.97	1.01
...helped me understand my weak areas in English discussions.	4.90	0.89
...motivated me to improve at English discussions.	4.50	1.07
...made me feel more confident about my English for discussions.	4.04	1.13
...improved my overall English-speaking skills.	4.27	1.00
...helped me prepare for the test.	4.85	0.92

Furthermore, Table 2 below highlights a substantial majority of students (99 out of 113) expressing a desire to use checklists in future courses, indicating a sustained interest and perceived utility. While these findings point towards an overall favorable reaction, the call for more detailed insights into why some students wished to use checklists again and others did not prompt further exploration. This nuanced understanding is crucial for refining and optimizing the checklist approach for diverse learner preferences and needs.

Table 2. Student Preferences to use the Checklists Again in Future (N=113)

Would you like to use the checklists again in future English courses?	Number of students
Yes	99
No	14

The following discussion of Table 3 will delve into specific points for the choice made in Table 2, providing a more granular analysis informed by previous research in the field.

Students recognized the value of incorporating **new phrases**, like 'How about...? It's...,' as a compelling reason to revisit the checklists. This practice suggested a link between inner speech, cognitive fluency, and utterance fluency, as proposed by Tomlinson (2020), hinting at the potential of private language practice to enhance discussion task fluency, aligning with findings from Bao (2020), Guerrero (2017), Guerrero & Villamil (1994), and McCafferty (1998). However, a notable proportion of students did not perceive a significant improvement in their English proficiency through checklist use, signaling a potential need for additional support, a concern to be further examined.

The aspect of **checking one's own level** emerged as a key theme, emphasizing the importance of transparency in performance and expectations through the use of counter-balanced checklists in pairs. This approach, influenced by Reynolds-Keefer (2010), Schamber, and Mahoney (2006), was seen as beneficial for promoting self-assessment and encouraging students to strive for improvement over time, aligning with insights from Dallimore et al. (2008).

**Creating English sentences** was a prominent subcategory, with students frequently noting the improvement in their ability to formulate sentences quickly. The connection between inner speech practices with checklists and enhanced fluency within discussions was apparent, suggesting a potential avenue for boosting discussion task fluency. This observation resonates with the works of Bao (2023b), Skehan (2003), and Tavakoli & Skehan (2005).

The **ease of use** of the checklists was generally positive, with students finding clarity in instructions helpful for focusing, fostering fluency, and directing their learning efforts. However, a subset of responses indicated a lack of clarity, pointing towards a need for more guidance, a concern to be explored in subsequent discussions.



The **fixed language/context** of the checklists generated mixed feelings among students, emphasizing the importance of balancing language restrictions. While some students appreciated the structure for its role in clarifying performance and motivating participation, others found it limiting. This dilemma, rooted in counter-balancing checklists in pairs, will be further deliberated in subsequent discussions, drawing from Reynolds-Keefer (2010), Schamber and Mahoney (2006), and Stroud (2017a).

The **interaction with others** about checklist sentences emerged as a positive experience, indicating that the checklists fostered motivation to share individual practice with inner speech. The potential anxiety reduction, attributed to the private nature of the initial practice, suggested a compelling strategy for encouraging interaction within discussions, aligning with Tomlinson & Avila (2007), Cao & Philp (2006), Forsyth (2006), and Han (2007). However, the absence of teacher feedback, as highlighted by one student, poses a notable concern, necessitating further examination in subsequent discussions.

Lastly, students reported finding the use of checklists **enjoyable**, implying that it could serve as a motivating method for learning. Additionally, some students acknowledged the utility of checklists as **scaffolding** for preparing and completing various learning steps, indicating their integration into the overall learning process. This alignment with the broader learning goals resonates with the perspectives of Panadero et al. (2012) and emphasizes the multifaceted role of checklists in supporting language acquisition.

Table 3. Student Reasons for Preferring to use the Checklists Again or not in Future (N=113)

Theme (total no. of responses)	Positive sub-theme (no. of responses)	Negative sub-theme (no. of responses)
English improvements (28)	Using new phrases (11)	No improvement (5)
	Overall English level (3)	
	Conversation skills (3)	
	Grammar usage (3)	
Checking own level (17)	Writing skills (3)	Not seeing own improvement (1)
	Seeing own ability (12)	
	Seeing own improvement (4)	
Creating English sentences (16)	Getting quicker at creating sentences (14)	
	Thinking more in English (2)	
Ease of use (15)	Clear what to do (11)	Unclear what to do (4)
Fixed language/context (10)	Good selection (5)	Too rigid (5)
Interaction with others (8)	Post-checklist review with a partner (4)	Lack of teacher feedback (1)
	Chances to speak in English (3)	
Enjoyment (6)	Fun to use (5)	Not fun to use (1)
Scaffolding of learning (5)	Preparation for the next stage (3)	
	Supportive of other practices (2)	

The feedback from students regarding the improvement of checklists in their language learning journey (see Table 4 below) reveals several key areas where they desire **additional guidance** and modifications. The need for more examples of language use, both in the form of supplementary teaching materials and examples provided by the teacher after completing checklists, emerges as a crucial point. This implies that students find explicit illustrations valuable for understanding and applying the language elements addressed in the checklists effectively. It underscores the significance of supporting checklists with additional instructional materials to enhance comprehension and implementation.

Some students express a desire for **more freedom in the context and language use** associated with checklist rows. While counter-balancing checklists aim to provide fair self-assessment opportunities, the recognition of varied student preferences suggests a need for teacher flexibility. This could involve adapting checklists to suit individual student needs, possibly informed by a needs analysis conducted at the beginning of the course. The call for more freedom emphasizes the importance of tailoring instructional tools to the diverse preferences and learning styles of students.

Table 4. Student Suggestions to Improve the Checklists (N=113)

Theme (total no. of responses)	Sub-theme (no. of responses)
More guidance (25)	More examples (17)
	More explanation (4)
	More feedback (4)
More freedom (11)	More context variety (7)
	More freedom in language use (4)
More practice (7)	More checklists (5)
	More rows in checklists (2)
Changing the difficulty (7)	Make the checklists harder (4)
	Make the checklists easier (3)
More writing practice (6)	
More than three minutes to complete (6)	
More interaction time with partners (6)	
More fun (4)	

The request for **more practice** or checklists with more than ten rows raises intriguing questions about the perceived benefits of checklist use. Students may see the checklists as instrumental in enhancing their discussion performance or believe that increased practice could lead to better scores in the allotted time. This aspect requires further investigation to uncover students' motivations and expectations related to checklist usage.

Seven students expressed concerns about the **difficulty level** of the checklists, indicating that they were either too easy or too hard. While this represents a relatively small percentage of the total student population, it emphasizes the potential benefits of conducting a needs analysis or pre-test with checklists to tailor their difficulty levels to match the students' proficiency. This highlights the importance of aligning instructional tools with the students' current skill levels to optimize their language learning experience.

The suggestion for **more writing practice**, particularly pre-checklist or post-checklist writing activities, underscores the potential benefits of incorporating complementary writing exercises. Such practices can provide additional support for language acquisition over time, reinforcing the language elements targeted in the checklists and contributing to a more comprehensive language learning approach.

The idea of adjusting the **time allocated** for completing checklists is presented as a flexible parameter that could be adapted to suit students' needs. Shortening the time over successive iterations is proposed as a potential strategy to foster the development of cognitive fluency with inner speech. This aspect introduces an intriguing avenue for further research, exploring the impact of time constraints on cognitive fluency and language performance.

The desire for **more interaction** time reveals students' enjoyment and engagement with verbalizing their checklist ideas. This suggests that post-checklist verbal discussions with peers contribute significantly to motivation and focus. Teachers are encouraged to consider the verbal output required from students after checklists as a key element in motivating them to undertake these activities with their inner voice, fostering an environment where students actively enjoy sharing their checklist sentence ideas.

The request for **more fun** in the checklist activities remains somewhat unclear, warranting further investigation. While the specific nature of 'fun' in this context is not specified, it suggests a broader need for teachers to incorporate enjoyable contexts into checklist-related activities. Exploring this aspect further through research can shed light on the role of enjoyment in language learning and its implications for instructional design.

## 5. Conclusion

The collective findings from Tables 1 to 4 shed light on the positive response of students to the integration of inner speech checklists into their language learning journey for discussions. The

perception of checklists as motivational tools, coupled with a significant majority expressing sustained interest and a desire for future checklist use, underscores their perceived value in enhancing the language learning experience. The nuanced exploration of Table 3 unraveled various facets of student experiences, revealing the intricate interplay between checklist utilization, inner speech, and language proficiency. While a substantial number of students reported improvements in creating English sentences and found ease in checklist use, concerns related to clarity, language restrictions, and the absence of teacher feedback were also voiced.

These findings carry important educational implications. The study advocates for the customization of instructional tools to cater to diverse learner preferences, addressing reactions to language restrictions and accommodating the desire for more freedom in checklist activities. Incorporating supplementary materials and examples is recommended to enhance comprehension, and including complementary writing exercises can contribute to a more comprehensive language learning strategy. Exploring the impact of time constraints on cognitive fluency and language performance presents an avenue for further research, and the encouragement of post-checklist verbal discussions is highlighted as a means to foster motivation and focus. Additionally, responding to students' call for more enjoyable contexts in checklist activities underscores the importance of understanding the role of enjoyment in language learning and its potential implications for instructional design.

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