

Student Experiences of Communication, Leadership and Presentation: A Qualitative Study

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学生のコミュニケーション・リーダーシップ・プレゼンテーション体験：質的研究

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Abstract: This case study examines how Japanese university students experience an extracurricular English communication club at a national science and engineering university in Japan. Interviews were conducted with six undergraduate members who had attended the club for at least one semester. Analysis was organised around eight pre-defined interview domains aligned with the study questions and the club's features. Findings indicate a small core of highly active student leaders. Most participants reported increased comfort speaking English in small groups, while speaking in front of the whole room and interacting with international students remained difficult. Students valued short, understandable presentations, situational role-plays, practical topics, and were critical of long one-way talks. The study argues that specific design choices in student-led clubs, such as leadership guides, clear expectations for presentation length and level, and structured support for intercultural contact, shape participation, confidence, and students' sense that English communication opportunities are worthwhile.

Key words: communication, EFL, extracurricular, student-led, university

1. Introduction

English education in Japanese universities is expected to provide more opportunities for spoken communication in English, yet large classes, dense curricula, and exam-driven expectations often limit extended speaking practice. Speaking tasks, presentations, and teacher-fronted interaction are common sources of anxiety for learners (Horwitz et al., 1986; Cutrone, 2009; Dykes, 2017). One response has been to support extracurricular spaces such as English conversation clubs, which can offer additional time for relaxed, non-graded use of English alongside formal courses.

Studies of conversation clubs and other out-of-class speaking activities in EFL settings report perceived gains in speaking opportunities, confidence, and fluency (Coşkun, 2016; Hia et al., 2016; Jayanti et al., 2022; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2022; Rahmawati, 2021; Nabilla et al., 2025). Yet such initiatives can struggle with uneven participation, unclear expectations, and limited staff time.

This study examines one such club, referred to here as the Engineering English Communication Club (EECC). This title is a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. The club meets once a week. It is open to students from any faculty and offers no registration, dues, or academic credit. Sessions typically include short student presentations, small-group discussion, and brief whole-group reporting. A rotating student-leadership model invites members to plan a session, while two faculty members usually attend as volunteer participants and facilitators. A third staff member supports administration and joins meetings as schedules allow.

These features are intended to increase speaking time and create a relatively low-pressure space separate from graded courses, yet students may experience them in different ways. Rotating leadership can feel empowering or intimidating, teacher participation can be reassuring or can bring back classroom norms, and presentations can energise a session or reduce interaction depending on topic, length, and delivery. This case study examines these design tensions through student interviews.

Existing work on conversation clubs and communities of practice has tended to focus on formal courses, teacher-run extracurricular programs, or clubs without teacher involvement (Coşkun, 2016; Hia et al., 2016; Iswati, 2025; Rahmawati, 2021). There is still limited qualitative research on how students experience a club that combines rotating student leadership with teacher participation. This study addresses that gap using communities of practice and foreign language anxiety perspectives.

The study asks three research questions:

1. How do student members describe their participation roles and experiences of rotating leadership in the club?
2. How do they perceive changes in their comfort and anxiety when speaking English in this setting?
3. How do they evaluate presentations, intercultural contact, and faculty facilitators in terms of what supports or hinders communication?

2. Literature Review

Conversation clubs and other out-of-class speaking activities are used in EFL settings to increase oral practice without extending formal teaching hours. Studies in Indonesian and Turkish contexts report that participation can increase opportunities for unrehearsed speaking, support confidence, and encourage perceived development of fluency and vocabulary (Coşkun, 2016; Hia et al., 2016; Jayanti et al., 2022; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2022; Rahmawati, 2021). School-based studies

also report perceived gains in willingness to speak (Jayanti et al., 2022; Rahmawati, 2021). However, creating an extra speaking opportunity does not automatically resolve anxiety, unequal participation, or unclear norms (Jayanti et al., 2022; Schiller, 2021; Sheokarah & Pillay, 2021), and mixed-methods evaluations note continuing difficulties with vocabulary limits, grammatical accuracy, and idea generation (Hia et al., 2016).

Work on university-level and adult conversation clubs emphasises social networks, identity work, and the positioning of clubs alongside formal study in sustaining participation (Schiller, 2021; Sheokarah & Pillay, 2021). These findings point to the value of examining how students experience a specific club, including participation roles, task types, and interactions with teachers.

Conversation clubs can be viewed as communities of practice in which members gradually move from peripheral to more central participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). A recent systematic review notes that such communities depend on regular interaction and peer support but often rely on a small core of active members and face difficulties sustaining shared leadership (Iswati, 2025). In the club studied here, rotating leadership is intended to support movement towards more central participation, making leadership practices a key focus (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Iswati, 2025).

Foreign language anxiety has been described as a situation-specific form of anxiety linked to language learning and can act as a “mental block” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 125). In Japanese universities, speaking in front of others and fear of negative evaluation are reported sources of anxiety (Cutrone, 2009; Dykes, 2017). As Cutrone (2009, p. 56) states, “It is this type of anxiety that teachers find most prevalent in oral EFL classes in Japan”. Research also suggests that regular small-group interaction can reduce anxiety when it builds a sense of community (Dykes, 2017), since “working in groups decreased anxiety when it created a sense of community and when students felt alone they also felt more self-conscious.” (Dykes, 2017, p. 45). This small-group versus whole-group contrast is relevant for an extracurricular club where discussion is often followed by brief reporting to the whole room.

Oral presentations in Japanese universities are often scripted and delivered with dense slides and limited interaction. Action research on shorter timed talks and mobile-video recordings reports that students value presentation practice while still experiencing anxiety (Toland et al., 2016). For a time-limited lunchtime club, presentation length, topic choice, and audience involvement shape whether talks support discussion or reduce interaction.

English conversation clubs are often promoted as spaces for intercultural contact, where interaction with international students can expose learners to different accents and perspectives and can shift English from a school subject towards a shared resource (Sheokarah & Pillay, 2021). In practice, international student attendance is often irregular, and clubs may depend on a small number of guests. Recent work suggests that some functions of intercultural contact can be supported through

synchronous online conversation spaces, though these are not experienced as fully equivalent to in-person meetings (Nabilla et al., 2025; Ngo & Ha, 2022).

Despite the label 'student-led', many clubs include some degree of teacher involvement. Teachers can help set norms, frame tasks, and keep discussions moving, but they can also dominate talk and reproduce teacher-fronted patterns (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). How students interpret teacher participation therefore matters for whether the club feels distinct from ordinary classes.

3. Context: The Club

EECC is a voluntary extracurricular English communication club held on campus. The weekly meeting takes place during lunchtime and typically lasts about 45 minutes. Meetings usually begin with one or two short student presentations, followed by small-group discussion tasks based on prepared prompts. Groups then share a brief summary with the whole room. Activities such as situational role-plays, vocabulary games, and short collaborative tasks are used to lower the entry point for less confident speakers. A rotating leadership system invites members to lead a session by choosing a topic, preparing prompts, and guiding activities. Two English-language teachers usually join as volunteer participants, circulating among groups to provide language support and keep interaction moving when discussion stalls. Attendance fluctuates across the term, and opportunities for face-to-face interaction with international students are uneven, which has encouraged the club to try occasional online exchanges.

4. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative case study design. The aim is to document how members interpret participation, rotating leadership, teacher participation, and specific activities, rather than to estimate causal effects. Interviews were selected because the research questions concern participants' accounts of comfort, anxiety, and evaluations of club practices, which are not easily accessed through observation alone.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six undergraduate members. All participants were Japanese undergraduates aged 19 to 21 at the time of data collection. Participants were regular attendees and motivated English language learners, as shown by consistent participation in the club. Convenience sampling was used to include a range of participation profiles, including frequent presenters, students who had taken a leadership turn, and members who mainly joined discussion. Participant 6 provided fewer usable extracts than others, but was retained to reflect a quieter participation profile within the club.

Interviews were conducted in English by the second author in November 2025 and lasted about 20 minutes. English was used because the club itself operates in English and the study focuses on how students experienced that English-medium space. This choice may have limited nuance

for some participants, yet members were accustomed to discussing club topics in English, and all participants were motivated learners. The interviewer used simple prompts and follow-up probes. Before the interview, participants received a bilingual research summary sheet and a bilingual informed consent document describing the use of interview material for academic outputs, and they signed the consent form prior to participation. A translator was not used and transcripts were not translated for member checking due to feasibility constraints, which limits the ability to check nuance and invites caution when interpreting claims.

The interview guide was structured around eight domains: (1) participation and role, (2) rotating leadership, (3) communication comfort and confidence, (4) real-life versus classroom atmosphere, (5) presentations, (6) intercultural contact, (7) teacher participation, and (8) suggested changes. These domains were derived from the research questions and from issues identified in the literature review on conversation clubs, communities of practice, foreign language anxiety, presentations, and intercultural contact. They were also chosen to mirror key design features of the club, ensuring that analysis stayed aligned with the study's purpose as a focused evaluation of the club's practices.

All interviews were audio recorded with consent and transcribed. A framework-based analysis was used and organised around the eight interview domains. This approach is an analysis of pre-defined themes rather than an inductive thematic analysis in which themes are generated from the data without an initial framework. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw without penalty, and that comments would not affect grades or club participation. Pseudonyms (Participant 1 to Participant 6) are used, and the club and university are described using broad pseudonyms with non-essential location and organisational details removed. The interviews focused on experiences of a non-sensitive extracurricular activity.

5. Results

5.1 Domain 1: Participation and Role

Students described a range of participation profiles. Some took on frequent presenting and leadership roles, while others mainly attended as discussants. The formal student leader explained that his role had shifted from presenting to creating space for others, P1: "I usually do present and discuss with my team members, but specifically when I started this English club, I usually present, but recently other members will do present, and I just discuss some topics. I am the leader of this club."

For others, the club was a place to speak English with peers in a relaxed format that included games, P3: "I am really enjoying communicating with my friends in English and discussing English and enjoying mini-game."

Some members described themselves as non-leaders, framing their role as joining discussion, P4: "I will just join in and I usually discuss other students around English."

5.2 Domain 2: Rotating Leadership

Students who had led sessions spoke about making slides, designing activities, and supporting newer presenters. The student leader stressed modelling and written guidance, P1: “I helped that I showed my presentation slide to create and to make presentation slide and also I teach them about how to use that time and how to speak in front of other members. Guide is most helpful for them because if they do not know how to make a slide and how to speak in front of other members that is different, so I think that guide and showing slide which I made, that is my opinion.”

One student said she had never volunteered to lead because of low confidence and uncertainty about expectations, P4: “Why, because I am not good at to speak English and other student so I do not have confidence. So I do not usually, I do not do. I think I want guide because I have not do before, so I do not understand what should I do.”

A more experienced member proposed a mentoring model where previous leaders support new ones through the process:

P5: “I would say like a pair or tutor. So if someone has been a leader, then he could be as a tutor of one leader and he could teach him or see like how to do a leader or like what point you should do.”

Across interviews, students asked for practical supports for leadership, including checklists, sample slides, co-leaders, and informal coaching. Rotating leadership therefore depends on mentoring to become realistic for less confident members.

5.3 Domain 3: Communication Comfort and Confidence

Most students reported increased comfort speaking English in the club, although some situations remained stressful.

P1: “For my experience, after we discussed about some topic, someone team member need to talk and speak our team member opinions. Then at that time, I talk other members our opinions, then that time I could speak English fluently compared to before. So that time I feel I have a confidence and sometime when I talk with a exchange student, also I feel I can get their confidence from my club because I can speak English more fluently. When I talk with some exchange student I feel sometimes I feel nervous, but before I started this club I was more nervous, but now it is getting lower.”

A quieter member compared her current comfort to her high school experience, attributing improvement to peer support: P4: “Yes, I think I become good to speak English than before like in high school because other people can speak English better than me so they teach me everything, something, so I think I become good.”

Another participant described clear gains in being able to generate sentences and vocabulary during discussion, but still felt nervous when speaking to the whole room as the

group reporter: P2: “I think yes, but... When I could make sentence by myself. Or know the new word. When I share the group conclusion. When I share the group conclusion that sometimes makes me nervous.” These accounts suggest that small-group interaction feels increasingly manageable for many members, while whole-group reporting remains a point of anxiety.

5.4 Domain 4: Real-life Versus Classroom Atmosphere

Students contrasted activities that felt like real communication with those that felt like class.

P1: “I think the discussion part is the most similar to real speaking, real situation and also we did some demonstration English club activity that is really helpful for me when I went to some airport which located some other country and also hotel when I went to the hotel in Taiwan I used that phrase which I practice in my English club that is really similar to real life. When we just started the English club, we did our English presentation, and we just speak some topic to other members, then just other members just listening to the presentation. That is really more classic class and without talking, it is not real, it is more class. So I think the presentation part is a little bit class.”

Another student appreciated airport and restaurant practice, but felt that heavy reliance on scripted handouts reduced authenticity: P2: “I feel real, but not completely real. Maybe guest or we have the paper like sentence. Just read the sentence. So it is not real.” A regular presenter echoed the view that open discussion feels like class, while carefully staged simulations feel closer to real life:

P5: “So I think discussion to like a class but the thing we did as like a citizen on the airplane or like all the tickets up there we felt it is like a reality. So first, we did a, how do you say, so one guy will do as a, like see the passport and like ask the guest, what did you come for this country, and the other guest will answer the problem. So it could make you, like when they travel to overseas, it may even make you more confident to speak.”

These comments show a tension between scripted support and the wish for more spontaneous talk.

5.5 Domain 5: Presentations

Students described presentations as useful when they were well timed, understandable for a mixed-ability group, and linked to discussion, rather than long one-way talks.

P1: “First one is time management because we have a limited time during the lunchtime so the great presentation has managed their time and also I think the member would like to know about other countries situation and also we just know about how to go studying abroad from this university so that presentation is related in some English, other countries. And also the good presentation is that it is easy to ask the presenter some question then they can

know what the presenter experience. Bad presentation? I think the first one is time management, and even that is the time, but the presentation still speak and present, that is not good, but also just speak their experience, because audience just can listen the presenter's opinions and experience, but audience would like to know about how do we can go outside or how do we can study abroad, so that is their point. Sometimes we have one difficult topic, so we need to discuss about that topic with people who have a TOEIC score 300 or 600, so we have a different skill. We need to choose a good topic which we can discuss easily. So bad presentation has one difficult topic."

Another student emphasized length and comprehensibility, stating a clear preference for short, easy to follow talks:

P3: "I think topic and length. Maybe short presentation because long presentation will makes me tired. Maybe, I think the presentation is difficult to understand. So if something in the presentation is difficult to understand, I think that makes the presentation not good. Maybe if a person's telling is not easy, I think it is bad."

A less confident member focused on interactive elements that feel accessible, especially simple group activities and games, while asking for a higher language level over time: P4: "I think it is a good activity, like before class we play a mini-game, it is very fun and it is easier for every student. So that activity, I always do that activity more. It is easier, it is very good, but sometimes it is too easy. So I want to play that activity in higher than English. I like to make group and do activity in those people because I like listen to other opinion because it is very good for me to listening English so I like that activity."

The data suggest that presentations work best when they are short, pitched to a mixed-ability audience, and used to prompt discussion or activities.

5.6 Domain 6: Intercultural Contact

Students valued interaction with international students and guests but noted that such opportunities were uneven across semesters. P5: "So, about like one year ago there was a lot of foreigners students, but right now because most of them are like doctor or master's class and they are so busy, so right now there are few or no guests, so like in the old time we did more, but right now we do not have a chance to talk with the foreigners. I would say confidence and also listening. So if you want to learn listening, then there is some YouTube or other things, but the reality and YouTube's speed are different, the pronunciation is also different, so if you speak with the real guy, then you can feel like your listening skills got better and better. I would say online video, because most of the students in Japan are very busy, but if you do online as like a Discord or Zoom, you can get communication with other universities in other countries, and also because it is online it is very easy to use for our generation."

Another participant described Discord exchanges with Malaysian and Australian students as especially meaningful, precisely because English was the default language: P3: “Maybe Discord. In this Discord, we have a chance to communicate with Malaysian students and Australian students. We usually speak in Japanese, but with international students, some can speak Japanese, but any other students are not good at speaking Japanese, so maybe it is the time, it is the chance to speak English and practice my English skill, so I think it is good experience for me.”

A third student focused on specific lexical gains from interactions with guests and maintained contact with overseas friends after short study abroad: P2: “Maybe every time. I did not know the new word, like, the example is white lie, white lie. White lie is equal good lie. And I learned that from the teacher, [faculty facilitator].”

These accounts show the perceived benefits of face-to-face and online contact.

5.7 Domain 7: Teacher Participation

Participants described teacher participation as helpful, especially when few international students were present. P1: “I think it is really helpful for us because sometimes international students do not come, then we are just Japanese student. It is difficult to talk and discuss some topics in English, but we separate the two groups or three groups. Just two English teachers, if they will come, one group has one English native speaker, so that is really helpful. And also, when we discussed some topics in English, they ask some questions, then we can continue our discussion, so they help us a lot I think. Sometimes we mistake the English phrase and sometimes we do not know how to say in English, but the English teacher can teach us how to speak English. It is called blah-blah-blah in English, so that is really helpful.”

Another regular member emphasised correction and grammatical support. P5: “For me it is very helpful because they are all foreigners and also teachers so they could teach us a good English or like, this grammar is not correct or this is correct and like, they know everything about the English so if we mistake something then they could teach us like this is different or not.”

Another participant valued the chance to communicate with English teachers outside class. P3: “Because especially third year students have no chances, because if there are no English classes, but if students join in the club, we can make the chance to speak, to communicate with the English teachers.”

Facilitators were described as language and interactional support rather than controlling figures.

5.8 Domain 8: Suggested Changes

When asked to propose one change for the next term, students focused on increasing participation, extending time, or adjusting format to attract guests.

P3: “Maybe I really want to, maybe to join more, to join more international student and English professor. So you would like more international students to join the club and have more English teachers too. But I want the Japanese student to join the club.”

P6: “International students come to this club, but real English is so, so fast. So I think it is difficult, so many people think, to communicate to international students and guests. I think not harm for me, but it is important. So, they, international students and guests, I want to come there, in face to face.”

A first-year student suggested that the lunchtime slot constrained depth of interaction and floated longer meetings outside the weekday schedule.

P4: “I will change time, because everyone has class in afternoon, so this very short time. So I want more, I want to take participate in more time, like Saturday or Sunday, but this is very difficult, so I cannot, it is request but...”

Another regular proposed changing the format, including more online delivery, to increase access for international students and other guests.

P5: “I will change the system so right now we do at the maybe [a campus room] but if we do like online or other ways then maybe we can get more guests or foreigners.”

Some suggestions are feasible within the club, such as clearer leadership guidance and active invitations to domestic students. Others, such as longer meeting times and regular international guests, depend on timetables and availability. Because the club relies on volunteers, facilitators have limited capacity to add extra work due to existing teaching, research, and administrative pressures.

6. Discussion

Participation profiles show a community of practice pattern in which a small core takes on organising work while others remain more peripheral (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Iswati, 2025). Participants did not reject rotating leadership, but less confident members described it as difficult to attempt without clear examples and mentoring (Iswati, 2025). This also matches reports that conversation clubs can rely on a small organiser core to sustain activity (Schiller, 2021; Sheokarah & Pillay, 2021). Participants described growing ease in small-group talk, while whole-group reporting and interaction with international students remained stressful points. This pattern matches work on foreign language anxiety in Japan, where public performance remains difficult even when supportive interaction increases (Cutrone, 2009; Dykes, 2017). It also fits accounts of fear of negative evaluation in speaking contexts (Horwitz et al., 1986; Cutrone, 2009). Perceived gains in confidence and

willingness to speak are consistent with conversation club studies in other EFL contexts (Jayanti et al., 2022; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2022).

Members distinguished activities that felt closer to everyday communication, especially small-group discussion and situational role plays, from segments that felt closer to a class, such as long monologue-style presentations or scripted reading. This supports claims that conversation clubs can increase opportunities for unrehearsed speaking in a lower-pressure setting, yet the perceived realism of talk depends on task design and participation norms (Coşkun, 2016; Hia et al., 2016; Sheokarah & Pillay, 2021). Comments about presentations also match concerns that long, scripted talks reduce interaction, while shorter formats can support engagement even when anxiety remains (Toland et al., 2016).

Students valued intercultural contact yet described it as uneven, which is a common challenge for co-curricular clubs (Sheokarah & Pillay, 2021). Their suggestions for live online exchanges point to a workable supplement when on-campus attendance is irregular, and recent studies report that online conversation spaces can support speaking practice and intercultural interaction when organised well (Nabilla et al., 2025; Ngo & Ha, 2022). Teacher participation was generally described as enabling rather than controlling, which fits a view of teachers as experienced participants who support interaction without taking over (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

For this club, the clearest levers are formalising leadership guidance, setting simple expectations for presentation length and level, and planning realistic channels for intercultural contact, including occasional online sessions (Nabilla et al., 2025; Ngo & Ha, 2022). Leadership guidance can be lightweight, for example a one-page checklist, sample slide templates, and a norm that first-time leaders co-lead with an experienced member. Presentation guidelines can specify a short time cap and a requirement to include at least one discussion prompt, which keeps the lunchtime meeting centred on interaction. Task design can maintain support for less confident speakers through prompt sheets and useful phrases, while avoiding full scripts that reduce spontaneous talk. Where face-to-face participation by international students is uneven, planned online exchanges can provide regular contact without relying on chance attendance (Nabilla et al., 2025; Ngo & Ha, 2022). Because the study draws on a small group of engaged members and English-language interviews, claims should be read as a focused account of this case rather than a general model.

7. Conclusion

This qualitative case study examined how Japanese university students experience a rotating-leadership English communication club outside formal coursework. Interview accounts indicate that discussion and situational tasks made English use feel more manageable for many members, while whole-room reporting and interaction with international students remained difficult. The club depended on a small core of active student leaders, and less confident members described leadership as more feasible when backed by clear guidance and mentoring. Participants preferred short

presentations that supported discussion and criticised long one-way talks. They valued teacher participation when it supported interaction without turning the session into a class. The study is based on six engaged current members in one limited setting and on English-language interviews, so it does not represent all possible viewpoints. Future research could combine interviews with observation and include former or infrequent members, and could also compare clubs with different leadership and teacher participation arrangements, including predominantly online formats.

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