



A Pilot Case Study of Task Design and Speaking-Related Tension in Early English Education: Child Speech in the Context of Promotional Framing

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Abstract: This case study and practice report examines whether observable indicators of speaking-related tension differed across two closely related tasks completed by one young EFL learner. A 7-year-old girl completed a simple number-reading task and a directed number-plus-noun task. Video data were examined qualitatively with support from Google AI Studio (Gemini 2.5 Flash Preview 04-17); AI-generated transcripts and notes served only as preliminary materials, and the researchers made all final interpretations. As a contextual component, five promotional videos from Japanese English-language schools were analyzed for recurring appeals and audiovisual features. Compared with the number-reading condition, the directed condition was accompanied by slower speech, more pauses, and greater visible hesitation. The promotional videos consistently emphasized enjoyment, reassurance, and educational effectiveness, with much of their persuasive function directed toward parents. Placing the learner's task-sensitive performance against this promotional framing highlights the importance of considering how enjoyment and confidence may depend on task design. The study therefore outlines a provisional four-step task-ramp sequence in which teachers stabilize a familiar task, add one demand, provide rehearsal, and then move to independent production. The sequence is proposed as a practice-oriented heuristic for future research and teacher education rather than as a validated intervention.



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Early English Education and Private Language Schools in Japan

Early English education has become a visible part

of Japanese schooling and family life. The Courses of Study published in 2008 introduced foreign language activities for fifth- and sixth-grade pupils from April 2011 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2008).

Later policy descriptions also emphasized the gradual expansion of foreign language learning at the elementary level (National Institute for Educational Policy Research [NIER], 2016). Alongside these changes, private English schools, home-learning materials, and digital resources have increasingly presented English as an appropriate activity from early childhood. In this study, private English-language schools refer to extracurricular providers that offer English instruction outside regular compulsory schooling. For young children in Japan, such programs constitute one of several opportunities for additional exposure to English beyond formal school education. Their promotional materials are therefore relevant not simply as advertisements, but also as public representations of what early English learning is expected to look and feel like.

Parents are important actors in this development. Yamamura (2021) reported that many Japanese parents wished to take an active role in their children's English education and recognized the value of beginning at home from an early age. Yet positive expectations do not necessarily mean that children feel comfortable whenever they are asked to speak. Young learners may enjoy songs, games, and classroom interaction while still becoming hesitant when a task demands immediate recall, an unfamiliar combination of words, or public performance.

1.2. Speaking-Related Tension and Task Design

Speaking anxiety has been widely discussed in second language research, but studies often focus on adolescents or adults. Foreign language classroom anxiety has been conceptualized as a situation-specific form of anxiety arising from the unique demands of foreign language learning, including communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and concern about making mistakes (Horwitz et al., 1986). Kirkpatrick et al. (2024) found that Japanese school students generally held positive attitudes toward learning English, while anxiety connected with speaking activities could still influence motivation. This distinction is important: a learner may like English as a subject or activity but experience tension in a

particular speaking situation.

Such tension may also be related to cognitive processing and task design. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) examined language anxiety in relation to input, processing, and output stages and showed that its effects can be subtle and pervasive. From a task-design perspective, even small changes in task requirements may alter cognitive demands and learners' perceptions of difficulty (Robinson, 2001). Therefore, hesitation in a speaking task should not be interpreted simply as a lack of ability or motivation. It may reflect the interaction between task demands, cognitive processing, and the emotional conditions under which the learner is asked to speak.

1.3. Research Gap, Purpose, and Questions

The present pilot study centers on one child's speech under two closely related task conditions. To provide a contextual frame for interpreting this task-sensitive performance, it also examines how five Japanese English-language schools represent early learning in promotional videos. The child video provides evidence of observable changes during task performance, whereas the promotional videos illustrate the broader public framing of early English learning as enjoyable, reassuring, and beneficial.

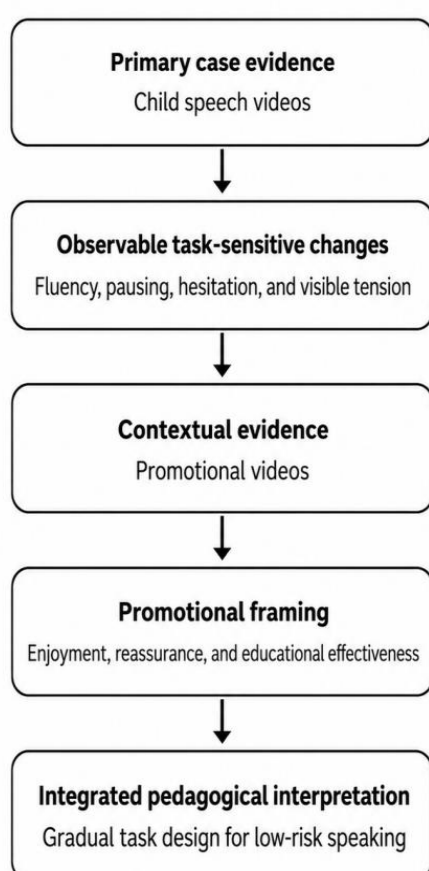
The distinctive contribution of the present study lies in bringing together two levels of evidence that are usually considered separately: a young learner's observable response to a small change in speaking-task demand and the public framing of early English learning in promotional discourse. The promotional videos are not treated as evidence about the child's psychological state. Rather, they provide a contextual account of the expectations surrounding early English education against which task-sensitive performance can be considered. This juxtaposition allows the study to shift attention from whether early English learning is represented as enjoyable to how task design may help create the conditions under which enjoyment and confidence are more likely to be sustained.

The primary purpose of this pilot study is to examine whether observable indicators of speaking-related tension differ across two closely

related speaking tasks completed by one young EFL learner. As a contextual component, the study also examines how early English learning is represented in five promotional videos, particularly the recurring emphasis on enjoyment, reassurance, and educational effectiveness. By placing the child's task-sensitive performance against this broader promotional framing, the study considers how gradual task progression may help teachers support low-risk speaking opportunities for young learners.

1. How does the learner's fluency, pausing, hesitation, and visible tension differ between a simple number-reading task and a directed number-plus-noun task?
2. How can this task-sensitive performance, considered alongside promotional representations of early English learning as enjoyable and reassuring, inform the gradual design of speaking tasks for young EFL learners?

Figure 1. Analytical framework of the study



2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research design

The study employed a qualitative pilot case design. It did not aim to measure a stable psychological trait or to generalize from one learner. Instead, it compared observable behavior across two speaking conditions and used the comparison to generate questions for later research. Promotional videos were analyzed as a contextual qualitative dataset in order to examine the public messages surrounding early English education.

2.2. Data sources

Two qualitative datasets were analyzed: the child speech videos and the promotional videos.

- **Child speech videos:** one 7-year-old learner completing two speaking tasks, analyzed for fluency, pauses, hesitation, task completion, and visible tension.
- **Promotional videos:** five Japanese English-language schools, analyzed for appeals, target audiences, repeated messages, and visual or audio features.

Google AI Studio was used only as an auxiliary tool for preliminary transcription and the organization of observations. The researchers made all final interpretations.

2.3. Participant and ethical considerations

The participant was a 7-year-old girl learning English in an EFL environment. No standardized English proficiency test or formal proficiency assessment was administered as part of this study; therefore, her proficiency level cannot be specified. Her exposure to English was primarily informal and took place at home rather than through regular instruction at a private language school. One of her parents is an English teacher and occasionally supported her English learning at home. Because this home-based exposure was informal and was not systematically documented, its precise duration and frequency cannot be specified. She did not attend any of the five private English-language schools whose promotional videos were analyzed in this study. The participant was not selected according to predetermined sampling criteria;

rather, she participated as an available case in this exploratory pilot study. Before data collection and recording, the purpose and procedure of the study were explained orally to the participant's parent, and verbal parental permission was obtained for her participation and for the use of the recorded data for research purposes. Her name, school, location, and other identifying details are not reported, and no image or audio sample that could identify her is reproduced in this article. The original video and audio files are stored securely, are accessible only to the researchers, and are used solely for research purposes.

2.4. Child speech tasks

The learner completed two short English speaking tasks. In the simple number-reading condition, she produced the numbers from 1 to 20 in sequence. In the directed number-plus-noun condition, she produced each number together with a specified noun. The second condition therefore retained the familiar number sequence but added a lexical requirement. The number sequence was selected because it was expected to be familiar to the learner and allowed the comparison to focus on how the addition of a small lexical demand was accompanied by changes in delivery.

The comparison was exploratory rather than experimental in the strict sense. It did not isolate a single causal variable, and the two task conditions were not counterbalanced. Instead, the analysis focused on observable differences in speech rhythm, pausing, hesitation, visible tension, and confidence-related cues across the two task conditions.

The exact duration of the session was not systematically recorded. A parent was present during the task session. No formal practice session was provided immediately before the recorded tasks, although the learner had prior informal practice with English in her everyday life. The participant was the daughter of a colleague at the researcher's workplace, and the researcher therefore had some prior familiarity with the family. Immediately before the task session, the participant had been spending time with her family at home.

The exact list of nouns used in the directed

condition was not systematically recorded. This lack of detailed task-material documentation is acknowledged as a methodological limitation of the present exploratory case study.

2.5. Promotional video corpus

The contextual dataset consisted of promotional videos associated with ECC Junior, NOVA Kindergarten, NOVA Elementary, Seiha English Language Institute, and Robinnext. The providers and videos were selected purposively according to the following criteria: the materials were publicly accessible, officially produced or distributed by the provider, concerned English education for young children or elementary-age learners, and represented services available in Japan. The aim was not to construct a statistically representative sample of the private English-school sector, but to examine a small set of visible public representations of early English learning. The analysis was informed by a multimodal perspective that considers how visual features contribute to meaning alongside spoken and written language (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). The analysis examined the main appeal of each video, the intended audience, repeated words or memorable phrases, persuasive techniques, and distinctive visual or audio features. It also considered which features appeared unique and which were shared across the videos.

2.6. AI-assisted qualitative procedure

Google AI Studio, using Gemini 2.5 Flash Preview 04-17, supported the first stage of the video analysis. For the child speech videos, the tool was asked to produce a transcript and describe fluency, pauses, task completion, errors or self-corrections, facial expressions, visible tension, enjoyment, and confusion. For the promotional videos, it was asked to summarize educational characteristics, identify major appeals and target audiences, note repeated language, and describe visual and audio production features.

The AI-generated transcripts and descriptions were not treated as independent findings. The researchers returned to the original videos, compared the preliminary outputs with the source material, and made the final interpretations. In

particular, affective states such as anxiety, enjoyment, or confusion were not assumed to be directly measurable from facial expression alone. The analysis therefore refers to observable indicators associated with speaking anxiety, such as reduced fluency, increased pausing, cautious production, and visible tension. These behaviors were not treated as uniquely diagnostic of anxiety, because they may also reflect increased cognitive processing demands, lexical retrieval difficulty, unfamiliarity with the task, or other situational factors.

All AI-generated observations were reviewed against the original videos by the researchers. When the AI output was considered ambiguous or inconsistent with the source material, the original recordings were prioritized, and the final interpretation was determined by researcher judgment. The observations reported in this study were treated as qualitative descriptions rather than quantitative measurements. More objective quantitative measures could be incorporated in future research. Throughout this article, references to anxiety, confidence, enjoyment, and confusion denote cautious researcher interpretations of observable, context-bound cues rather than direct measurements of the participant's internal states.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Comparison of child speech across conditions

The learner completed both tasks successfully. In both conditions, the numbers were produced in the expected order, and no major errors, repeated mistakes, or serious breakdowns were observed. The comparison therefore concerned changes in delivery rather than failure to understand the number sequence. Because the comparison was exploratory and the task conditions were not counterbalanced, the observed differences should not be interpreted as evidence of a causal effect of the added noun requirement alone. Table 1 summarizes the main observable differences between the simple number-reading condition and the directed number-plus-noun condition.

Table 1 - Observable Differences Between the Two Speaking Conditions

Indicator	Simple number-reading task	Directed number-plus-noun task
TC	Completed	Completed
ME	Not observed	Not observed
SR	Relatively steady	Slower and interrupted
P	Limited	More frequent
TR	Less evident	More evident
CE	More evident	Less evident
H	Limited	More evident
TD	None	Present (number+noun)

Note. TC = Task completion; ME = Major errors; SR = speech rhythm; P = pauses; TR = tension-related cues; CE = confidence/enjoyment-related cues; H = hesitation/possible confusion; TD = Additional task demand.

In the simple number-reading condition, the learner maintained a relatively steady rhythm. Pauses were limited, and her facial expression and tone appeared relaxed. She completed the sequence smoothly and displayed observable cues that were interpreted as greater confidence and enjoyment. The familiar and highly predictable sequence was accompanied by relatively fluent and rhythmic production.

The directed number-plus-noun condition produced a different pattern. Speech became slower, pauses occurred more frequently, and the learner appeared to check the instruction before continuing. Her facial expression and tone showed greater caution, hesitation, and occasional confusion. The task was still completed, but the additional noun requirement appeared to interrupt the rhythm that had characterized the simple condition.

These observations do not establish a clinical or stable level of anxiety. They do, however, indicate that, within this case, a small difference in task design coincided with a noticeable change in performance and observable tension-related cues. The contrast is consistent with the possibility that the added lexical requirement may have contributed to reduced automaticity and apparent confidence in this learner during this particular task.

3.2. Promotional representations of early English education

Although the videos visually foreground children through playful activities, smiling faces, songs, and classroom interaction, the persuasive function of these materials is best understood as being directed primarily toward parents, who are typically responsible for selecting and financing early English education. Appeals to enjoyment may therefore serve a dual function: they present English as attractive to children while simultaneously reassuring parents that participation will be emotionally safe and developmentally beneficial. In this sense, images of children having fun should not be interpreted simply as child-directed appeals; they also operate as evidence offered to parents that the learning environment is supportive, structured, and appropriate for young learners.

Three recurring appeal types were identified across the five promotional videos: enjoyment, reassurance, and educational effectiveness. Enjoyment was communicated through smiling children, playful movement, songs, colorful materials, and lively classroom scenes. Reassurance was constructed through references to instructors, learning environments, institutional experience, or a clear lesson structure. Educational effectiveness was expressed through messages about growth, future learning, communication ability, and the benefits of early exposure to English. Table 2 summarizes the main appeals and representative features identified in each promotional video.

The videos also shared visual and audio techniques. Bright classrooms and child-friendly materials appeared repeatedly. Children's voices and actual lesson sounds created a sense of immediacy, while cheerful background music supported an atmosphere of familiarity and optimism. The videos addressed children through play and excitement, but they also addressed parents through images of safety, organization, and educational progress.

Table 2 - Main Appeals and Representative Features of Promotional Videos

Provider	Main appeal	Representative features
ECC Junior	Enjoyment / Reassurance	Smiling children, classroom scenes
NOVA Kindergarten	Enjoyment / Reassurance	Teacher-child interaction
NOVA Elementary	Educational effectiveness	Lesson scenes, children's voices
Seiha English Language Institute	Reassurance	Bright classrooms, colorful materials
Robinnext	Educational effectiveness	Narration, structured presentation

Although the wording and production style differed across providers, the basic message was notably consistent: English learning should be enjoyable, safe, and useful for a child's development. In this promotional discourse, the possibility of hesitation or speaking-related tension remained largely invisible. The videos constructed a positive and relatively low-risk image of English learning through cheerful and reassuring cues.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Task demand and speaking-related tension

In this case, the change in task design was accompanied by a change in how comfortably the learner appeared to speak. The simple number-reading condition allowed the learner to rely on familiarity, sequence, and repetition. The directed condition required her to retain the instruction and integrate a noun into each utterance. Even though the additional requirement was small, it created a second point of attention and may have increased cognitive load.

This pattern is consistent with previous research on language anxiety and task complexity. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) argued that language anxiety can interfere with cognitive processing across input, processing, and output stages of second

language performance. Robinson (2001) also emphasized that task complexity concerns the cognitive demands created by task design. In the present study, the number-plus-noun task was designed to add a lexical processing demand without substantially changing the number knowledge required. This may have reduced automaticity and made the learner more cautious during production.

This account helps explain why the directed condition was slower and more hesitant without implying that the learner lacked the relevant number knowledge. The performance difference appeared after the task changed, not because the basic material had changed substantially. The observed hesitation in this case appeared to be task-sensitive. This observation supports the possibility, to be examined in larger studies, that speaking-related tension in young learners may sometimes be situational.

This case also supports caution against automatically interpreting silence or hesitation as a lack of motivation. Kirkpatrick et al. (2024) showed that positive attitudes toward English can coexist with anxiety about speaking. The present case illustrates this possibility at a smaller level. The learner completed both activities and did not reject the task, but the additional demand altered the manner in which she spoke.

4.2. Connecting the promotional promise with classroom task demand

The main interpretive value of the combined analysis lies in the contrast between the two datasets. The promotional videos repeatedly present early English learning as enjoyable, reassuring, and educationally effective. The child case, however, suggests that the learner's apparent confidence may have shifted when one small demand was added to the familiar task. This contrast is important because foreign language anxiety research has shown that speaking in the target language can be a particularly anxiety-provoking aspect of language learning, particularly when learners are concerned about mistakes, evaluation, or being unable to express themselves (Horwitz et al., 1986). Young (1991) further

suggests that anxiety is shaped not only by learner characteristics but also by classroom procedures, error correction, and opportunities for supported practice. The point is therefore not that promotional materials are inaccurate, but that enjoyment is not an automatic property of an activity. It is partly produced by the way the activity is sequenced, modeled, rehearsed, and supported.

The images of smiling children and cheerful classrooms construct a public model of the successful young learner as active, relaxed, sociable, and visibly happy. Such images may be intended to encourage participation and reassure families, but ordinary pauses, uncertainty, and gradual development were largely absent from the five videos examined. Placing the promotional message beside the case evidence reveals a practical tension: the five promotional videos examined here presented enjoyment as an immediate feature, whereas teachers often have to create the conditions that make enjoyment possible. This distinction shifts the discussion from whether a lesson looks enjoyable to how instructional design may support confidence when task demands increase. Although the present study did not examine later stages of education, the findings suggest a need for future research on whether low-risk participation and gradual task progression can be maintained as speaking demands increase. This possibility should be treated as a hypothesis for future investigation rather than as a finding of the present case study.

5. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1. A provisional four-step task-ramp sequence

The proposed four-step task-ramp sequence was derived from three observations considered together. First, the learner showed relatively fluent and relaxed performance in the familiar number-reading task. Second, the addition of a single lexical demand in the number-plus-noun condition coincided with slower production, more pausing, and greater visible hesitation. Third, the promotional videos consistently framed early English learning in terms of enjoyment,

reassurance, and positive engagement. Taken together, these observations suggest that enjoyment and confidence should not be assumed to arise automatically from an activity; rather, they may depend partly on how new task demands are introduced and supported.

On this basis, and informed by previous research on task complexity (Robinson, 2001) and low-anxiety classroom procedures (Young, 1991), we provisionally outline a four-step task-ramp sequence for early speaking activities. The sequence is not presented as an empirically validated intervention, but as a practice-oriented heuristic that should be examined in future studies with a larger number of learners.

Each step is designed to increase task complexity gradually rather than adding several demands at once. First, stabilize a familiar base task so that the learner can establish rhythm and automaticity. Second, add only one new demand and make it visible through modeling or a worked example. Third, provide preparation time and a low-risk rehearsal, such as quiet practice, pair work, or choral production. Fourth, move to independent production and delay detailed correction until the learner has completed the message. This sequence may make it easier to identify which added demand is associated with a change in the learner's performance.

The sequence also clarifies the role of enjoyable activities such as songs, rhythm, pair work, and short repeated exchanges. Their value is not limited to entertainment. They may function as structured bridges from supported to less-supported production by offering predictable language, shared timing, and repeated opportunities to succeed before a new demand is introduced.

Feedback and public communication may also benefit from the same principle. Teachers can value fluency and willingness to try alongside accuracy, while schools can present pauses, mistakes, and gradual improvement as normal parts of learning. A more balanced public message can still emphasize enjoyment while acknowledging that confidence may be supported through preparation, manageable challenge, and supportive feedback.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations should be recognized. The child analysis involved only one participant and two short tasks. The findings are therefore preliminary and cannot be generalized to young learners as a group. Speaking anxiety was not measured through a validated scale or interview; it was inferred cautiously from observable indicators. Facial expression and tone are open to interpretation, and the presence of recording may itself have influenced behavior.

The promotional dataset was limited to five videos from selected providers. Other schools, local programs, online services, and home-learning products may use different messages. The videos were also analyzed as public promotional texts rather than through interviews with their producers or viewers, so the intended and received meanings may not be identical.

Future research should include more children, repeated observations, and systematically controlled tasks. Quantitative measures such as speech duration, mean pause length, pause frequency, and rate of self-correction could complement qualitative observation. Human coding by multiple raters would also improve reliability and allow comparison with AI-assisted notes. For promotional discourse, a larger corpus and parent interviews could clarify how messages about enjoyment and reassurance shape expectations.

The two task conditions were not counterbalanced, and the learner's familiarity with the specified noun was not independently assessed. The observed differences therefore cannot be attributed solely to task demand; task order, novelty, lexical familiarity, fatigue, or other contextual factors may also have contributed.

7. CONCLUSION

This pilot case study examined a small change in a young learner's English speaking task and compared that experience with promotional representations of early English education. The learner completed both tasks, yet the directed

number-plus-noun condition was accompanied by slower speech, more pauses, and greater visible hesitation. The promotional videos, meanwhile, consistently presented early learning as enjoyable, reassuring, and educationally beneficial.

Taken together, the present case and the five-video corpus highlight a possible tension between promotional representations of enjoyable early English learning and the task-sensitive nature of one child's speaking performance. The findings do not establish a general pattern among young learners. They suggest, however, that gradual task progression warrants further examination as a possible means of supporting learners' willingness to speak. Although exploratory, the study offers a starting point for larger investigations of observable speaking-related tension and for more nuanced discussions of enjoyment in early EFL education.

For teacher education and professional development in early English education, the present case suggests the value of training teachers to recognize hesitation not simply as lack of motivation or ability, but as a possible response to changes in task demand. The proposed task-ramp sequence may provide a practical framework for designing low-risk speaking opportunities, although its effectiveness requires examination with larger and more diverse groups of learners.

APPENDIX: ANALYTIC PROMPTS

Child speech video prompt

The tool was asked to transcribe the video and describe speech fluency, visible tension based on facial expressions, task completion, errors or self-corrections, speech duration, pauses or silence, and possible signs of motivation, enjoyment, or confusion based on facial expression and tone of voice.

Promotional video prompt

The tool was asked to summarize the characteristics of early English education, identify the main appeals and their relationship to the video

content, describe the primary target audience and persuasive techniques, list repeated keywords or memorable phrases, note distinctive visual and audio features, and compare the video with other early English education advertisements where possible.

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