

# Exploring First Year University Students' Use of Cotopatio

Stephanie Tunçay

## **Abstract**

This study investigated first year university students' usage of Cotopatio, their attitudes towards it, and the goals they set when attending. A series of graded speaking journals were assigned to 30 participants over a course of one semester, in which they were required to write about their experience visiting Cotopatio. A 9-item survey and the speaking journal assignments were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Results suggested that motivational level increased for the majority of the students, and students felt they had become better speakers by the end of the 14-week period. Most prominent in the speaking journals was students' desire to speak more actively in the conversations.

## **Introduction**

While English classes serve as a gateway to develop students' English skills, there are issues that need to be contended with. First, the number of contact hours may not be sufficient for student progress (Bibby et al., 2016). Secondly, though active learning is encouraged in the classes, it is in fact the teachers who have the ultimate control over aspects such as what to teach and how to teach (Hughes et al., 2011). Students have individual preferences for learning styles and these styles do not always match what the teachers offer. Furthermore, students can sometimes feel inhibited when communicating with their peers in English in the classroom (Cao & Phillip, 2006; Zhong, 2013; Osterman, 2014).

In recent years, Japanese universities are investing increasingly in spaces where students can socialize with each other in a non-threatening atmosphere and practice their language skills (Chen & Mynard, 2018). According to Mynard (2019), this space provides students with the chance to exercise autonomy in language learning. Students can decide

when to go, how long to stay, and how to spend their time there.

At Cotopatio, which is located on the premises of Tokyo Keizai University and established in 2015, students can practice their foreign language skills and network with other students. It is staffed by native English speakers and student interns. No appointment is necessary, and there are occasionally special cultural events and presentations given by students who have studied abroad before. While English is the main language practiced at Cotopatio, there are also time slots dedicated to Chinese and Korean.

The majority of the visitors who frequent Cotopatio have high motivation for learning English and as a result, they go there of their own accord. However, there are also many students who do not go to Cotopatio at the university. This could be attributed to various reasons, such as students' level of interest, anxiety, and awareness of Cotopatio. While English Communication is a mandatory course for all first-year students at the university, they are not required to take English from the second year on. Therefore, it seems especially important to acquaint as many students as possible to Cotopatio during their first year. The current study explores such an initiative.

## **Literature Review**

### **On Language Lounges**

Many studies have looked at student attitudes and the challenges they face at the language lounge. Brasier et al. (2019) conducted a survey of 131 participants who had visited Language Out Loud Lounge at Kagoshima University on a voluntary basis. Improvement of motivation to learn English (26%), improvement of communication skills (17%), and improvement of English skills (16%) were some of the positive effects that students mentioned. 44% of the participants reported visiting more than four times, whereas 29% only attended once. The reasons most cited for not attending more than once were schedule conflicts, the space being overcrowded, and students being too shy.

The study by Noguchi (2015) revealed that Japanese students felt less inhibited when speaking in English with other students at the specially designated English space because there was no marker of hierarchy in the English language. This enabled the students to feel equal with the others and not be constrained by the senior-junior relationship between each other. This finding was corroborated by Kurokawa et al. (2013); students in their study stated that the non-Japanese atmosphere was attractive because the Japanese rules (e.g., not talking to strangers, bowing) no longer applied.

Even though the conversation lounge aims to be a place where students do not feel anxious or threatened, power imbalances still exist. Garnica and Mislant (2022) examined student talk time at the lounge by comparing sessions led by an English-speaking instructor and those led by a student intern who was a non-native English speaker. While there was no statistically significant difference, it was observed that the students' average number of words and turns were greater when being led by the non-native English speaker staff, as opposed to one led by the native English speaker staff. Analysis of the transcripts gathered during the conversations revealed that while the native English speaker leaders seemed to take on their teacher role and explain concepts to students more often, the non-native English speakers made more of an effort to build connections with the attendees. As for the attendees, they inadvertently took on a more passive role as listeners when interacting with staff who were native English speakers, and were more engaged in speaking with the non-native staff.

In order to investigate the phenomenon of low-level English learners visiting the English lounge, Kiyota (2021) assigned 37 beginner-level students to visit the English lounge every two weeks in small groups during the semester; 10 students continued doing so voluntarily in the second semester. Analysis of the students' reflective journals revealed that group dynamics strengthened resilience.

Assessment of the Language Tables at the International Christian University was conducted by Ueno (2019) in the second year of its inception. In the study, students who visited the Language Tables were surveyed and interviewed in order to find out what their needs were. At the beginning of the one-year period, the majority of the students responded positively to the item that asked if they were able to get enough practice speaking in their target language. At the end of the one-year period, however, the number of students satisfied with the amount of practice decreased. The author of the study suggested that this was because the Language Tables had become more popular and therefore, students were not able to speak as much as they would have liked.

### **On Learner Diaries**

Speaking journals can be considered to be a form of *learner diary*, defined by Bailey (1990) as “a first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular, candid entries in a personal journal” (p.215). According to Young and Fong (2003), learner diaries can help develop students' metacognitive awareness in language.

The study by Paterson (2022) examined what effect the learner diaries had on Japanese university students learning English. It was found that the diaries had the most impact on students who already had a high level of metacognitive awareness, which correlated with increased speech performance. It was also observed that students who frequently mentioned their goals in the diaries had more significant gains in their speaking performance, as it enabled them to monitor and adjust their strategies accordingly. In order for more students to benefit from the learner diaries, it was recommended that instructors give feedback and extra support to those students who need them in the learner diaries.

### **The Present Study**

To date, very few studies have examined student usage of Cotopatio at Tokyo Keizai University. This research attempts to fill this gap and shed light on the experiences of first year students who were assigned to go to Cotopatio and record their reflections in speaking journals. This study sets out to answer the following questions:

Research Question 1

How do first year students who are assigned speaking journals use Cotopatio?

Research Question 2

What are student attitudes towards Cotopatio?

Research Question 3

What goals do students set for themselves at Cotopatio?

### **Methodology**

#### **Setting and Participants**

The study was conducted at Tokyo Keizai University, which specializes in business, economics, communication studies, and law. All freshmen students are required to take a year-long English course that focuses on communication skills. The class meets twice a week, and each session is 90 minutes long. The students are streamed into different levels based on their CASEC scores.

There were 30 participants in this study. Half of the participants belonged to the uppermost level (CEFR level A2 to B1) and the other half belonged to the second highest level (CEFR level A2).

The researcher of this study was also the participants' instructor. During the semester, participants from these two classes had graded assignments where they were instructed to go to Cotopatio four times (i.e., once per month) and submit speaking journals in English about their experience on the following aspects: (1) what they talked about during the visit, (2) how they evaluated their own English performance, and (3) their plans on how to improve their speaking at Cotopatio. The grade was based on whether the assignment was submitted on time and whether it fulfilled the word count requirement.

### **Instruments**

There were two instruments used in this study. One was a 9-item paper survey administered during class time at the end of the 14-week semester, which provided the quantitative data. The survey was written and answered in Japanese so that the participants could accurately understand the items and convey their thoughts. The English translation of the survey is provided below (see Table 1). Voluntary consent was obtained from the participants. The first three items were multiple choice questions that asked basic questions about their Cotopatio usage. Items 4 to 8 were Likert-scale questions that set out to investigate their attitudes and strategies for using Cotopatio. For

**Table 1**

<i>Survey</i>	
Item 1	How often did you visit Cotopatio this semester?
Item 2	How long did you stay at Cotopatio on average?
Item 3	Who did you go with to Cotopatio?
Item 4	I was able to speak a lot of English at Cotopatio.
Item 5	When I spent time with highly motivated people at Cotopatio, my motivation went up.
Item 6	My motivation to study English went up at Cotopatio.
Item 7	I spent more time listening than speaking at Cotopatio.
Item 8	I followed through with my plans in the speaking journal at my next Cotopatio visit.
Item 9	Do you have any other comments?

these items, there was also a space where students could write their comments if they had any. Item 9 asked participants if they had any other comments.

The second instrument used was the speaking journals (see Appendix) that students submitted over the course of the semester. This provided the qualitative data for this research. Out of the 30 participants in this study, 20 of them gave their consent to have their speaking journals analyzed. However, four of those who consented were excluded from the analysis as they did not submit all four journal entries. Consequently, 16 journals were analyzed for this study. The grammatical errors in the student excerpts published in this research have been corrected.

## Results

### How Students Utilize Cotopatio

To answer Research Question 1, which asked, "How do first year students who are assigned speaking journals use Cotopatio?", Items 1 to 3 were analyzed.

**Table 2**

*Findings from Survey Item 1*

Item 1 How often did you visit Cotopatio this semester?

less than 4 times	4 times	more than 4 times
1 (3.3%)	23 (76.7%)	6 (20%)

Item 1 asked, "How often did you visit Cotopatio this semester?" (see Table 2). There were 23 participants (76.7%) who stated they visited four times, which coincided with the number of speaking journal assignments given. Six participants (20%) stated they visited more than four times, and one (3.3%) stated they visited less than four times.

**Table 3**

*Findings from Survey Item 2*

Item 2 How long did you stay at Cotopatio on average?

less than 30 min.	between 30 and 60 min.	more than 60 min.
12 (40%)	14 (46.7%)	4 (13.3%)

Item 2 asked, "How long did you stay at Cotopatio on average?" (see Table 3). While

14 participants (46.7%) said they visited between 30 minutes and an hour, 12 (40%) said they visited less than 30 minutes. Four (13.3%) said they visited for more than an hour.

**Table 4**

*Findings from Survey Item 3*

Item 3 Who did you go with to Cotopatio?

alone	with a friend	alone or with a friend
5 (17%)	19 (63%)	9 (20%)

Item 3 asked “Who did you go with to Cotopatio?” (see Table 4). There were 19 participants (63%) that said they went with a friend, and nine participants (20%) who said they sometimes went with friend and sometimes alone. Five participants (17%) said they went alone.

### Student Attitudes towards Cotopatio

To answer Research Question 2, which asked, “What are student attitudes towards Cotopatio?”, Items 4 to Items 8 from the survey (see Table 5), free responses from Item 9, and the speaking journal entries were analyzed.

Item 9 of the survey was noncompulsory and asked the students if they had any oth-

**Table 5**

*Findings from Survey Items 4 to 8*

Item	Completely Disagree		Neutral		Completely Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
4 I was able to speak a lot of English at Cotopatio.	0 (0%)	3 (10%)	10 (33.3%)	17 (56.7%)	0 (0%)
5 When I spent time with highly motivated people at Cotopatio, my motivation went up.	0 (0%)	2 (6.7%)	4 (13.3%)	20 (66.7%)	4 (13.3%)
6 My motivation to study English went up at Cotopatio.	0 (0%)	4 (13.3%)	7 (23.3%)	16 (53%)	3 (10%)
7 I spent more time listening than speaking at Cotopatio.	0 (0%)	7 (23.3%)	12 (40%)	9 (30%)	2 (6.6%)
8 I followed through with my plans in the speaking journal at my next Cotopatio visit.	1 (3%)	4 (13.3%)	6 (20%)	15 (50%)	4 (13.3%)

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er comments. There were four who responded. One wrote that it would be good if there was always a table for beginners. Three wrote about the small size of the Cotopatio room.

Here is a sample comment:

"It was scary because we were in close proximity with each other, which took some time to get used to."

16 speaking journals were analyzed for themes, based on the frequency of mentions. The two themes that emerged were (1) anxiety and (2) positive effect of others.

Some variation of the word *anxiety* or *nervousness* appeared in 13 students' journals.

"I think I can't talk much if there are many people. I have to try harder even if there are many people. That is why I think I should talk positively."

"I went to Cotopatio by myself for the first time. I was confused for ten minutes because I couldn't get into the conversation. After I got into the conversation, I was surprised that I was able to talk smoothly. But there were no friends, so I was nervous for a long time."

"I was nervous during Cotopatio. I understood what the teacher said to others, but I couldn't understand it when he talked to me. I want to relax more."

By the fourth entry for the speaking journal, there were fewer mentions of anxiety. One wrote about learning to cope by attending Cotopatio sessions with friends. Another said that visiting Cotopatio repeatedly alleviated anxiety.

One student made it his/her goal to relax:

"Last time, I was nervous and puzzled. So I aimed to relax. I was conscious of enjoying the conversation this time."

The second theme that emerged was the positive effects of others. Participants often wrote about positive experiences they had with other attendees at Cotopatio.



“When I spoke, everyone gave good reactions and nodded. I was very happy because I felt that everyone listened to my introduction carefully.”

“One boy was speaking English well. I thought he was great. I felt that I want to speak English well like him.”

“We played a game. We made sentences using words on cards. Other people asked me questions about my sentences. I could not ask other people many questions. But someone asked questions one after another. I thought he was great.”

### Goals Students Set at Cotopatio

To answer Research Question 3, which asked, “What goals do students set for themselves at Cotopatio?”, the final two sections of the speaking journals were analyzed. The frequency of mentions was recorded.

The table above (see Table 6) shows the areas mentioned by the participants. The

**Table 6**

*Findings from Speaking Journals*

<b>areas mentioned</b>	<b># of participants</b>	<b>sample comments</b>
speaking actively	12 (75%)	I was silent so I want to talk more.
vocabulary	10 (62.5%)	I have to memorize more words.
asking questions	6 (37.5%)	I want to ask questions about what others have said.
grammar	6 (37.5%)	I should use past tense naturally in the conversation.
giving reactions	4 (8.7%)	I want to use different reactions, not just “wow.”
listening	3 (18.8%)	I want to be able to understand more.
reducing mistakes	2 (12.5%)	I want to use the past tense more.
not being afraid of mistakes	2 (12.5%)	I don’t want to worry about mistakes.
gesture	1 (6.3%)	I want to use gesture.
speaking on the spot	1 (6.3%)	I want to be able to come up with topics.
speaking like a native	1 (6.3%)	I will try to speak like a native speaker.
speaking louder	1 (6.3%)	My voice is so small so I should speak louder.
idioms	1 (6.3%)	I want to use idioms.

most mentioned areas for improvement were speaking actively (12 students), vocabulary (10 students), asking question (six students), and grammar (six students).

## **Discussion**

### **Analysis of Findings**

This study investigated how first year university students in the English Communication class at Tokyo Keizai University used Cotopatio (Research Question 1), their attitudes towards Cotopatio (Research Question 2), and the speaking goals these students had set for themselves (Research Question 3).

60% of the participants stated that they were at Cotopatio for more than 30 minutes at a time (see Table 3). This was encouraging as the students were instructed at the beginning of the semester to visit Cotopatio for a minimum of 10 minutes, but many chose to stay longer. The majority of the participants also visited Cotopatio with other people.

63% of the participants responded that their motivation to study English increased as a result of the Cotopatio visit (see Table 5, Item 6). This is consistent with the results in the study by Rose and Elliot (2010), who observed that many of the students that were assigned by their teacher to visit the English space developed satisfaction of the area and higher confidence with repeated use. Increase in the students' motivation were also observed in the study by Graham and Darrell (2018).

Murphey and Arao (2001) define *near peer models* as those who are close to one's social status and/or age and have positive effects on individuals. It is highly likely that the participants of the study were able to come into contact with near peer models at Cotopatio, which increased their motivation.

While the majority of the participants reported that their motivation went up, 11 participants (36.6%) stated in Item 7 of the survey that they spent more time listening than speaking at Cotopatio. There are many possible reasons for this. It could be that some participants experienced anxiety when speaking to people for the first time or to those whose English was perceived to be superior. Participants also mentioned in the journals that speaking up in large groups was challenging. Whether there was a staff member who was a native English speaker in the group could have made a difference (Garnica and Mislang, 2021). Finally, a lack of vocabulary may have hindered students from speaking (Nation, 2001). In the speaking journals, some students wrote that they were not always able to participate because the conversation was moving too quickly for them to process

the words being spoken.

The areas students chose to focus on in order to improve their experience at Cotopatio between visits revealed that the majority hoped to become active speakers of English. Many wrote that they wanted to be able to take part in deciding the flow of the conversation, to ask questions, and to give reactions that were more than just one or two words. The speaking journals also showed that many participants believed that the different areas of focus had a strong connection to speaking actively. For example, they wrote that having an extensive vocabulary helped them to become active speakers, so it was important to learn vocabulary. The same was observed for grammar, where students equated more grammatical knowledge to improved speaking skills. Out of the 16 participants, 14 wrote in their fourth entry that they had felt their English had improved.

Students in the present study wrote in their speaking journals about their own performance at Cotopatio and what they hoped to accomplish in future visits. Paterson (2022) observed in her study that learners who explored their experiences more fully in the journals developed their metacognitive awareness the most, which would in turn aid the the learning process. Such could also be the case in this study; the students who wrote more perhaps had greater gains. However, regardless of individual differences, the participants had positive opinions of the speaking journal assignment overall, and they stated that the speaking journal assignment helped them to become better speakers.

Below is a student sample comment:

“I have gained a lot of experience, and although this time it was in short sentences, I was able to convey a lot of what I wanted to say. I think my grammar was often wrong, but I realized that while grammar is important, it is also important to be able to convey words smoothly. My vocabulary has increased and I feel that speaking is more fun than before. I would like to do my best in the second semester.”

### **Recommendations**

The following are recommendations for making Cotopatio more beneficial to the students at Tokyo Keizai University. First of all, instead of simply requiring speaking journals, which can feel like a solitary endeavor at times, teachers could help students process their experience at Cotopatio. For example, students could talk about their Cotopatio experience with each other or read their journals out loud. Through this activity, students may realize that others share the hopes and challenges they themselves have; this in turn

can create a sense of unity. If students were anxious, they can talk about what specific circumstances, if any, made them anxious and how they overcame or plan to overcome them. This type of intervention is described by Kiyota (2021), who observed that positive group dynamics were important for the L2 socialization process of students. In it, the teacher-researcher encouraged the students to work together in small groups at almost every stage.

Secondly, it is worthwhile to consider what can be done in order to decrease student anxiety and to persuade students of all levels that they are welcome at Cotopatio. The study found that low-level students were intimidated by the fluent speakers and large group sizes. The same was observed in the study by Ueno (2019). To its credit, Cotopatio has already taken several steps to make itself inclusive. For example, there are tags that can be worn by visitors indicating they wish to just listen to other people speak. Also, there is a special table available from Monday to Friday around lunch time at Cotopatio, where novice speakers can practice with the help of student staff. While it is possible that lunch time was chosen because it was convenient for both students and student staff, students may be hesitant to visit if it is too crowded. Expanding the time for the beginner hour may help attract even more users. The relocation of Cotopatio could be considered as well. If it were relocated to a space that was more visible to students (i.e., moved from the second floor to the first floor), it would be easier for students to drop in.

Third, a needs analysis could be conducted to better serve Cotopatio users. In this study, the layout of the Cotopatio space was mentioned by three participants. Dean and Sugiura (2017) noted that for an English lounge to be successful, it is necessary to include the voices of all stakeholders. A survey answered by Cotopatio attendees would be invaluable and bring to attention other areas that users would like to see changes in.

Finally, it would be beneficial for all stake holders at the university if there were more opportunities for interaction between the English teachers and Cotopatio staff. If the teachers are more knowledgeable about Cotopatio, it would be easier for them to encourage their students to visit the space. Though emails are sent to teachers at the start of the academic year introducing Cotopatio, special events are announced on the TKU portal, and teachers are invited to schedule class visits to Cotopatio, a more teacher-oriented event could help increase understanding and cooperation between the teachers and Cotopatio staff.

One avenue for future research is to explore how many of the students who were assigned speaking journals in their freshman English Communication class continue to visit

Cotopatio in later years. The participants in the study by Graham and Darrell (2018) were assigned to visit the self-access center in their first year at university, but when the requirement was lifted in the second year, the vast majority of the group stopped visiting. It is possible that the students became too busy or simply lost interest in attending. Still, it is possible that they found other ways to practice their English skills. It would be useful to investigate whether or not the same holds true for the participants of the present study, as well as what kind of qualities the students that continue to visit Cotopatio possess.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study that will be addressed. First, the results of this small-scale study cannot be generalized due to the number of participants (N=30 for the survey, N=16 for the speaking journal) and the limited number of class levels explored. In order to get a clearer picture of how first year students at the university in question perceive Cotopatio and their English learning in relation to it, the participant pool should be expanded to include all levels.

Secondly, the answers students provided in the survey are their own perceptions of their experiences at Cotopatio; triangulation of other data would have enhanced reliability. For instance, Item 2 asked how long students stayed at Cotopatio on average, but students were not asked to time their visits when they occurred. In another example, Item 7 asked students to choose a numerical value from 1 to 5 on whether they thought they listened more than they spoke at Cotopatio. Once again, this item relies heavily on student perceptions, so it is difficult to ascertain whether the students really did speak more or listen more. That said, perceptions are still an important part of how an individual processes reality, and it is meaningful to know what they are.

### **Conclusion**

Though teachers at Tokyo Keizai University may be aware of the existence of Cotopatio, they may not have much knowledge of what takes place inside since its target audience is the students. The present study addressed this issue by exploring how first year university students in an English class visited Cotopatio to take ownership of their language learning experience for one semester. It was found that visiting Cotopatio had a

positive impact on the students. The majority of the participants said their motivation to study English went up and their speaking had improved. They mentioned challenges in their journals (e.g., anxiety, lack of vocabulary, not knowing how to ask questions), but they wrote in subsequent entries how they had worked to overcome the challenges.

It is to be seen whether the students in this study will continue to visit Cotopatio after their first year is completed. What can be said is that the speaking journal task helped to introduce Cotopatio to these students, who otherwise might not have visited at all. In addition, it gave the student more contact hours with English outside the classroom. It is hoped that the current study can provide a glimpse into one possible way the services at Cotopatio can be utilized in tandem with English classes.

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## Appendix

### Speaking Journal

DATE:	WITH WHOM:
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#### **1-SUMMARY OF YOUR CONVERSATION**

A) What did you talk about? (at least 80 words)

B) How was your speaking performance? (at least 80 words)

#### **2-ANALYSIS OF YOUR PLAN**

A) In your previous journal, you made a plan to improve your speaking for this conversation. How did your plan go? Were you able to improve the way you wanted? Please explain. (at least 40 words)

#### **3-YOUR NEW PLAN FOR IMPROVEMENT**

A) What would you like to improve for your next conversation? Choose one area to focus on. Please be as specific as possible.