

Overcoming Japanese EFL Learners' Fear of Speaking

Pino Cutrone

This article looks at language anxiety as it affects Japanese EFL learners when performing oral tasks. A review of the literature illustrates the perspectives from which foreign language anxiety research has been conducted. The reasons Japanese EFL learners experience language anxiety when performing oral tasks are explored. Some of the potential causes of Japanese EFL learners' language anxiety have been identified as communication apprehension, social evaluation, and inter-learner competition. This article provides several suggestions designed to assist foreign EFL teachers in Japan in dealing with their learners' language anxiety. Foreign EFL teachers in Japan are encouraged to learn as much as possible about Japanese society and culture, so as to better understand how these factors may influence learners when speaking a foreign language. It is also suggested that EFL teachers in Japan strive towards making their classrooms more intimate (i.e., less formal), and move away from the evaluation paradigm, which seems ingrained in the values of Japanese society.

1. Introduction

A topic of increasing research attention in the study of language learning is the role of *language anxiety*. There exists a considerable amount of literature related to the struggles and reticence of Japanese EFL learners when asked to perform oral tasks in their EFL classes. This paper will attempt to address this issue in an effort to inform language pedagogy in contexts similar to this one. Section 2 of this paper will begin by presenting research that has been conducted in this area and explaining how it assists in the greater understanding of SLA. In the third section I will discuss how language anxiety affects the Japanese learner's ability to perform oral tasks and examine some of the reasons that may contribute to it. Lastly, Section 4 will show how the general research into language anxiety (4.2), along with the unique circumstances pertinent to the Japanese learner (4.3) can provide useful information for teachers who can subsequently make adjustments to improve their teaching methods and practices where language anxiety is concerned.

2. The contribution of language anxiety research to our understanding of SLA

The study of language anxiety contributes to our understanding of SLA processes in many ways. From the research (e.g. Horwitz & Cope 1986; Horwitz et al. 1989; Gardner & MacIntyre 1993), language anxiety can now be defined more specifically than ever before. Accordingly, we can determine what influence it has on learners, and find out what causes it to occur. The answers to these questions can go a long way in helping teachers devise their classroom methods and practices, as I will discuss in detail in part three.

2.1 What is language anxiety?

Various studies comparing students' levels of anxiety in their foreign language class to their other classes (e.g. math, history, etc.) indicate that students experience considerably more anxiety in their foreign language classes (Muchnik & Wolfe 1982; Horwitz et al. 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner 1989). The concept of 'foreign language anxiety' is still in its infancy,

thus second language research has not yet adequately defined it in precise terms (Horwitz et al. 1986). Further, there are many varying degrees of intensity, which seemingly make it difficult to apply boundaries towards a set definition (MacIntyre & Gardner 1991; Doyon 2000). Some generalizations can, however, be made. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993: 5) define language anxiety as “the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient”. Some of the symptoms include nervousness, tension, apprehension, and introversion.

2.2. Effects of anxiety on learning

Much of the early research (Chastain 1975; Kleinmann 1977; Scovel 1978) devoted to anxiety and language learning was difficult to interpret because of its contradictory results. Part of the reason for this has been attributed to the *general* measurement employed. Some of the early research suggests that a certain amount of anxiety can actually help learners' performance in the classroom (Scovel 1978). For example, Kleinmann (1977) reports positive correlations between facilitating anxiety and the use of more difficult linguistic structures. However, as Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) have suggested, this may have more to do with the general measures taken in the studies. More recent studies, using a more specific approach to measurement, support the widespread view that anxiety generally has a debilitating effect on L2 performance (Gardner et al. 1976; Horwitz et al. 1986; Gardner & MacIntyre 1993).

Some studies have shown that anxiety influences the communication strategies learners employ in a language class. For instance, Ely (1986) reports that anxious learners were less likely to take risks in the language class. Similarly, Steinberg & Horwitz (1986) found that anxious learners produced less interpretive and more concrete messages than relaxed learners. The results found in these studies are consistent with research on other types of specific communication anxiety, which states that anxious learners generally speak, write, and participate less in the language classroom than relaxed students (Spolsky 1989).

2.3. Causes of language anxiety

Horwitz et al. (1986) theorize that foreign language anxiety in the classroom can be attributed to three performance anxieties: communication apprehension, social evaluation, and test anxiety. First, communication apprehension may be defined as the fear over the real or anticipated act of speaking. It is this type of anxiety that teachers find most prevalent in oral EFL classes in Japan. Second, social evaluation may be defined as the worry over how one's actions will be perceived by others in the social setting. It is this type of anxiety that Zimbardo (1977) reports to be predominant in Japanese society. Lastly, test anxiety may be defined as the fear of failure, especially when skills are being measured formally as in exams.

This theory is largely based on clinical experience and anecdotal evidence; however, it has received large support in terms of research activity and validating evidence is accumulating. The components receiving the strongest support seem to be communication apprehension and social evaluation, while the importance of test anxiety remains inconclusive (MacIntyre & Gardner 1991).

Other studies have also helped us in understanding the causes of language anxiety. For instance, Bailey's study (1983) in which she analyzed learners' diaries found that learners' competitive natures can act as a source of anxiety. In addition, some researchers have claimed that students may suffer language anxiety due to cultural inhibitions. Oxford (1992) likens this to the concept known as culture shock. Learners may fear the experience of losing their identities in the target culture (Ellis 1994). This concept is further developed in Clément's model (1980), which is discussed below.

A further reason which has been suggested for the inconclusive results in early studies is that the relationship between anxiety and achievement is probably not a linear one. Many

other factors such as motivation, personality, experience, and self-confidence may also play a role. Researchers have developed models to account for some of these factors.

2.3.1. MacIntyre and Gardner's model

MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) propose a model in which the relationship between anxiety and learning is moderated by the learners' stage of development and their learning experiences. In this model, language anxiety is seen as a learned emotional response. Language anxiety develops as the result of repeated negative experiences with the L2, whereas positive experiences are thought to erode the negative effects of language anxiety, which would be expected to decrease as proficiency increases. This assertion is consistent with my own observations in the classroom and has been supported by a great amount of research (Gardner et al. 1977; Gardner et al. 1979; Desrochers & Gardner 1981; Chapelle & Roberts 1986).

2.3.2. Clément's model

Another model receiving empirical support is that proposed by Clément (Clément et al. 1977a, 1977b; Clément & Kruidenier 1985; Clément 1986; Labrie & Clément 1986). Clément's model does not account for language anxiety as an independent factor but rather as a subordinate construct of self-confidence. Clément (1980, 1986) considers self-confidence to encompass both a lack of anxiety and positive self-ratings. The premise here is that the more confident the learner is, the more frequently he/she will engage in practicing the L2, thus reaching a higher proficiency (Dörnyei & Schmidt 2001). Consistent with the more recent results of Tajima (2002) concerning FLA, Matsuda and Gobel (2003) and Tani-Fukuchi and Sakamoto (2005) reported that through overseas experience, the Japanese University students in their studies increased self-confidence in speaking and, consequently, their L2 proficiency improved. Clément's model describes two motivational processes present in multicultural settings. The primary motivation is determined by the interplay between learners' desire to affiliate with the target language community and fear of losing their cultural identity. Clément (1980) asserts that the effect of this process will determine the amount of contact with the other group. The secondary motivation is based on the frequency and quality of interaction with the other group. If this contact is positive, students can improve their self-confidence and increase their motivation to learn the target language (MacIntyre & Gardner 1991). Thus, MacIntyre & Gardner (1989) and Clément's (1980) models and the research supporting them have provided us with a greater understanding of language anxiety. They have shown language anxiety to be associated with experiences in the L2, and they have shown that the relationship between language anxiety and achievement is probably not a linear one, consisting of other possible factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and personality.

2.3.3. The willingness to communicate model

More recently, a promising model to emerge in the affective constructs that account for many of the individual differences in L2 communication is the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model. WTC, first developed in L1 communication by McCroskey & Richmond (1987) was applied to L2 communication by MacIntyre and Charos (1996). WTC can be generally defined as the tendency of an individual to initiate communication when free to do so (McCroskey & Richmond 1987, 1990). In this model, higher levels of perceived competence combined with lower levels of anxiety would lead to greater WTC and, in turn, more frequent communication in the L2. This was supported by Baker and Macintyre's (2000) study which examined high school anglophone students and the effects of a French immersion versus a non-immersion program on various dependent variables including communication anxiety, perceived competence, WTC, self-reported frequency of communication, and motivation.

3. Language anxiety and the Japanese learner

This section of this paper examines language anxiety as it pertains specifically to the Japanese EFL learner's ability to perform oral tasks. First, I will look at some of the characteristics of language anxiety that relate to the Japanese learner, and subsequently, I will discuss some of the causes which may contribute to it.

3.1. Why are Japanese EFL learners reluctant to speak?

One of the main phenomena that have been observed among Japanese learners is their disposition towards reticent behavior (Ellis 1991; Anderson 1993; Townsend & Danling 1998; Greer 2000). Helgesen (1993) reports that his learners (in Japanese universities) rarely initiated conversation, avoided bringing up new topics, did not challenge the teacher, seldom asked for clarification, and did not volunteer answers. Townsend & Danling (1998), among others, attribute this type of behavior to the anxiety Japanese learners experience when using the L2. The type of behavior Helgesen (1993) describes is consistent with the observations foreign EFL teachers commonly have of their students in Japan. Nevertheless, this may have had more to do with the learners' social and cultural codes for speaking. As Anderson (1993) points out, Japanese people do talk, and sometimes they talk a lot, but the contexts in which they speak are culturally sanctioned and do not correspond to the cultural codes of the Western world. Thus, EFL teachers expecting their Japanese learners to bring up new topics and volunteer answers may be disappointed. Quite simply, Japanese learners seem reluctant to talk in settings where they will stand out in front of their peers (Anderson 1993).

3.1.1. Inexperience and cultural inhibitions in dealing with Western teaching methods

Japanese learners are likely to experience language anxiety in oral EFL classes because they are simply not prepared to deal with the social components of Western-style teaching practices, where a great emphasis is put on individualism, challenging the teacher, and original opinions. In contrast, according to Nozaki (1993) the Japanese think of quietness, obedience, and passivity as good traits for a learner to possess. Traditionally, the method of teaching in Japan is teacher-fronted, and unlike western classrooms, little (if any) input is solicited from the student.

3.1.2. Interactional domains

Some of the anxiety occurring in language classrooms in Japan can be attributed to the stigmatization of the conventional classroom as a ritualistic domain. Most of a Japanese person's educational interactions will occur in what Lebra (1976) terms the 'ritual domain'. This domain is characterized by conventional rules, formalities, and highly-guarded behavior. Doyon (2000) among others attests that reticence is a natural form of defensive behavior in this domain.

3.1.3. Teacher's demeanor and attitude

Teachers showing a negative or disappointed reaction to learners' behavior can also cause language anxiety. Evidence has shown that the teacher's demeanor and attitude may be one of the greatest factors in shaping Japanese learners' attitudes (Shimizu 1995; Hadley & Hadley 1996; Long 1997). My own classroom-based research supports this assertion (Cutrone 2001). In a survey in which I asked some of my learners 'What is a good English teacher?', their responses indicated overwhelmingly that personality and demeanor/attitude were the most important factors (94 of 144 statements in the survey belonged to the personality and/or demeanor category, as participants cited attributes such as kindness, friendliness, a good sense of humor, and stability as some of the traits they desired in an English teacher).

3.1.4. Shyness: a positive quality?

In one of the only studies of its kind, Zimbardo (1977), a psychologist at Stanford University who pioneered research into shyness in the U.S., compared shyness in various cultural contexts and found evidence to suggest that Japanese people may be shyer and more sensitive by nature than other cultures. While shyness may impede learners' chances of success in an oral EFL class, it is often considered an admirable trait in Japanese society (Townsend & Danling 1998). My own experience supports this claim, at least partially: in an informal survey, I asked 15 students the following questions: 'Are you shy?' and 'Do you think shyness is a positive or negative quality?'. All of the students responded that they were shy; however, only five students viewed shyness as a positive quality. Of the remaining 11 students, four believed shyness to be a negative quality, and six were undecided. When I asked six of my colleagues (from Western countries) the same questions, three of them replied that they were shy, while the other three replied that they were not shy, but all of them view shyness as a liability. Although I realize that "shyness" is a difficult trait to measure because there exist varying degrees, I have included the results of this simple survey to show that Japanese peoples' attitudes towards shyness may differ from those of people from Western countries.

3.1.5. Evaluation paradigm

Another cause of language anxiety in Japan is learners' concern about the evaluation of them by others. The Japanese school system, consistent with the values ingrained in Japanese society, places a great emphasis on the evaluation paradigm. Nozaki (1993) describes the intense pressure and competition Japanese learners experience in their childhood, as their lives typically revolve around countless examinations that determine their future. Some of my learners have cited their fear of making mistakes as the greatest cause of their anxiety in the language classroom. This may help explain Japanese learners' reluctance to speak and their sometimes defensive reactions to error correction (Doyon 2000).

4. Pedagogical implications

The research and ideas presented in this paper may serve as a basis for a few generalizations related to EFL teaching in Japan. First and foremost, we can assume that language anxiety has a debilitating effect on learners' success in the L2, and that teachers should make an effort to alleviate it in their classrooms. Second, we can speculate that learners' anxiety may be heightened by some of the cultural misunderstandings that exist between Japan and the West. Finally, in efforts to aid in its prevention, we can begin to identify some of the potential causes of language anxiety such as communication apprehension, social evaluation, and inter-learner competition. The section that follows will discuss how some of the insights presented earlier can be used to aid EFL learners in Japan in performing oral tasks.

4.1. Acceptance and attitude

The idea of teachers' acceptance of the cultural differences that exist in ELT is central to any serious discussion about attempting to reduce language anxiety in the classroom. While this principle may seem fundamental, it has been proven, in my experience, a difficult concept for some teachers to embrace. That is, teachers may have ethnocentric ideas about what rudeness is, and how students should behave in the classroom. It is thus advisable for teachers to consider the possibility such as apparent aloofness, avoidance, and introversion in learners' behavior may be due to anxiety. Teachers' negative reactions to this type of behavior most likely only serve to exacerbate their learners' anxiety.

4.2. Learning the cultural codes

In efforts to encourage speaking in EFL classes in Japan, teachers would be well advised to consider what situations their learners are inclined to speak in and why and how these situations are different from those in the West. As mentioned above, Japanese learners are reluctant to talk in situations where they will stand out in front of their peers. The notion that language learning can only take place with aggressive students volunteering individually is merely a reflection of Western ethnocentrism. Nevertheless, many students will expect their English classes taught by foreigners to be different, and some will, in fact, welcome the new experience. However, as Anderson (1993) suggests, too different too soon may alienate students. A better approach seems to be a combination of techniques that draw on the dynamics of the Japanese classroom, with strategies that promote a Western style of interaction. Group-work activities have proven to be especially effective in getting my students to speak more (see Cutrone 2002).

In addition, EFL teachers in Japan should be careful not to show annoyance when learners are reluctant to speak, as this will only exacerbate the problem by adding to the learners' apprehension. In Japan, where there is evidence that people may be quieter than other cultures by nature (Zimbardo 1977), there is always the danger of Western EFL teachers pressuring their students to be more outspoken. In my opinion, teachers would be well served in extending their own tolerance of silence when interacting with learners, as this may encourage learners to speak more.

4.3. Moving towards intimacy

In further efforts to make the learning environment less stressful, teachers should attempt to move away from the ritual domain commonly found in conventional classrooms in Japan, and aim for a more intimate domain commonly associated with family, friends, and co-workers. In calling for this approach, Williams (1994) asserts that in intimate situations, Japanese people appear more relaxed because they are released from cultural and institutional restraints, and thus in intimate classrooms learners are free to explore the target language and feel more comfortable speaking in front of others. One of the ways teachers can create intimacy between students is to choose topics relating to learners' personal experiences and backgrounds and have learners share this information in group activities. Williams (1994) argues that the more students know about each other and have in common, the more comfortable they are likely to be. Similarly, teachers showing a personal interest in their students' lives from time to time can also help in creating an intimate classroom. Stevick (1980) calls this the *removal of the teacher's mask*, and some of the strategies his research suggests include being friendly with students, engaging them in conversations, mixing in small talk from time to time, and speaking to them on a one to one basis more often.

4.4. Moving away from the evaluation paradigm

Another way for teachers to create intimacy in the language classroom is to move away from the evaluation paradigm, which includes less positive evaluation as well as negative evaluation. According to Stevick (1980), it is the evaluative environment that causes stress, not the content. In a review of research on feedback, Williams and Burden (1997) report that students really need to feel that the teacher has a genuine interest in them as people, and not merely in evaluating the L2 they produce. Thus, the challenging part for teachers seems to be having students feel good about themselves without feeling as if they were being evaluated. One of the ways teachers can move further away from the evaluation paradigm in language classrooms is by carefully controlling their use of error correction. While students may say on a conscious level that they would like to be corrected strictly, their anxious reactions indicate otherwise. In my experience, overt error correction often inhibits students from expressing themselves freely and can lead to high levels of anxiety. Seemingly, teachers would be well

served in taking less obtrusive methods in their error correction practices and waiting until a certain level of trust has been established between themselves and the student.

4.5. Helping students cope

There are some other ways teachers can help reduce language anxiety in the classroom. First, they can employ activity types that cause lower levels of anxiety (such as pair work) and gradually introduce activity types that cause higher levels of anxiety (such as speech giving). Moreover, teachers can help students to better cope with anxiety-provoking situations themselves: Horwitz et al. (1986) suggest techniques such as giving advice on effective language learning strategies, journal keeping, and behavioral contracting (a simple positive-reinforcement tool that is widely used by teachers to change student behavior). Finally, relaxation exercises such as yoga, meditation, and biofeedback have also been suggested as ways to allay students' anxiety (Doyon 2000).

5. Conclusion

The problem of learners' language anxiety remains one of the greatest obstacles teachers have to overcome in language classrooms. In Japan, this problem often stems from, and results in, cultural misunderstandings. I hope to have shed some light on this complex phenomenon, which teachers can only deal with successfully if they are properly informed. The research to date has contributed to our understanding of language anxiety, and provides useful insights to teachers as they consider classroom methods and practices. Nonetheless, there is much we do not yet know about language anxiety (particularly about its relationship with other factors such as motivation, personality, and self-confidence), so more research in this area would be particularly fruitful.

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Pino Cutrone received his B.A. majoring in Sociology from the University of Winnipeg in 1997. In 2002 he graduated from the University of Leicester's M.A. in Applied Linguistics/TESOL program. He has spent eleven years teaching EFL in Japan. Currently, he is a lecturer at the University of Nagasaki and a PhD candidate in the field of Applied Linguistics at the University of Reading. His research interests include conversational analysis in intercultural communication, sociolinguistics relating to Japanese EFL learners, and CALL. Email: p.cutrone@reading.ac.uk.