

Speaking Anxiety: Japanese Students in the EFL Environment

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Abstract

The present study was carried out as a means of investigating and understanding the nature and sources of speaking anxiety in the EFL classroom. In order to determine which speaking activities students find to be the most anxiety producing, a qualitative questionnaire was administered. Participants consisted of 140 Japanese students in the first and second year of university. By obtaining a deeper insight into anxiety causing activities, instructors can better address this issue. The findings in this study indicated that students believe speaking activities such as presentations and conversations to be the greatest cause of anxiety. Interestingly, students find the practice and preparation to be among the most helpful tools for helping them mitigate feelings of anxiety. Based on findings, authors will offer recommendations for possible activities to be used in the classroom. These activities may help students mitigate feelings of anxiety, in order to help learners become more communicatively competent, which may lead to greater self-confidence, thereby helping students achieve their language learning goals.

Keywords: Speaking Anxiety, Language Learning, Activities

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Introduction

Language Anxiety is defined as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (MacIntyre & Garner, 1994). Because this type of anxiety is the result of a combination of factors intrinsic to language learning, it is considered a situation-specific form of anxiety (Horowitz et.al, 1986). This type of anxiety is measured by three inter-linked components: communication apprehension (the fear of communicating with others), fear of negative evaluation (apprehension by evaluation of others, and test anxiety (performance anxiety due to fear of failure) (Horowitz et.al., 1986).

Because speaking is a significant part of language learning, language anxiety typically manifests itself in situations where spoken language production occurs (Dewele, 2002; Woodrow, 2006).

Thus, speaking anxiety is a major hurdle learners must overcome in the language classroom (Öztekin, 2011; Wang & Chang, 2010). When speaking, feelings of anxiety cause negative learner perceptions such as feelings of self-doubt, or shyness when communicating orally before peers (Mayer, 2008). In addition, it has been found to cause problems related to self-confidence and self-esteem as learners often engage in self-deprecating thoughts, such as “I’m stupid” or “I can’t do this,” which affects a learners ability to see themselves as a successful learner (Pappamihel, 2002; Kalra & Siribud, 2020). These components have a significant negative effect on learner perceptions of “self” and beliefs about language learning, which in turn affect learner achievement and performance levels in the target language (Young, 1991). This threat to a learner’s sense of self, can result in a learner feeling discouraged or losing faith in their abilities, refrain from participating in classroom activities, and potentially giving up the effort to learn the language (Na, 2007, as cited by Awan et.al., 2010).

In addition to learner perceptions of “self,” anxiety can also affect a learner’s appraisal of classroom situations. Anxiety may result in a learner perceiving certain activities as threatening, which can negatively affect the learning process (Pappamihel, 2002). Student perceptions are influenced by their fears of making mistakes, fears of leaving a bad impression on others, or fears of disapproval by others (Aydin, 2008). Thus, those who experience speaking anxiety do not feel confident when required to speak in the target language, preferring to remain silent. Unfortunately, the longer students are exposed to anxiety causing activities, the more likely to become “fossilized,” and the more difficult to overcome (Tercan & Dikilitas, 2016).

Research Questions

1. What specific classroom activities provoke anxiety in the classroom environment?
2. What classroom activities help mitigate language learning anxiety?

Rationale

According to Horwitz (need to mention the original year, need to mention the original year, as cited by Guess, 2007), although foreign language anxiety typically affects 28 to 30 percent of European language learners, and around 33 percent of U.S. learners, it affects 40 to 43 percent of Asian learners. In Japan, speaking anxiety among learners is typically due to student fears of ‘taking risks’. This fear often means that students are unlikely to speak until they are called

on (Koba et al., 2000). According to Yoshida (2010), this tendency of Japanese students to remain silent has been attributed to cultural features such as: maintaining harmony and avoiding direct opposition. In addition, Japanese people tend to be indirect in their communication, they often interpret feelings and convey their intent via nonverbal communication. Thus, understanding these cultural factors are crucial to understanding where learner anxieties stem from. With this understanding, teachers can assess the best tools to utilize to foster student success.

Methodology

Participants & Setting

Participants consisted of 140 first and second-year English majors, at a Japanese university. Class sizes ranged between 17-25 students, between the ages of 18-21. The study was performed within a mandatory four-skills English course, which participants must enroll in as part of their degree requirement. Participation was fully voluntary, and students were advised that data collected would be confidential, and participation would have no bearing on course grades. The study was conducted mid-semester, during the spring of 2021.

Data Collection

The study adopted a qualitative survey design to assess both learner experience, and student beliefs about language learning anxiety. A questionnaire, written solely in English, consisted of twenty-one items, and was developed as the instrument for data collection (see APPENDIX A). The twenty-one questions consisted of general background information; student perceptions about their communication ability; and learner experience and beliefs.

Results

Causes of Anxiety When Expressing Self in English

When asked about general feelings of anxiety when expressing themselves in the target language, seventy percent of students admitted to feelings of anxiety. Having ascertained the number of students that generally experience feelings of anxiety in the classroom, students were then asked about the causes of these feelings. Based on the results, the majority of students feel anxious about speaking in English because of a lack of confidence, or because they feel they lack the vocabulary or other language skills necessary to express themselves.

Among the responses were comments such as: "I realize I can't speak English well" [Rikuto], and "My English is not good enough to express myself perfectly, and I'm afraid of being misunderstood by someone" [Kyoka]. Another student stated they were feeling unsure of the "correctness" of their grammar. Finally, a striking example that encapsulates a common sentiment shared by many students is, "I'm unable to articulate my views precisely." Because individuals understand how to communicate effectively in their native language, attempting to find the appropriate words or phrases in English may be incredibly unpleasant and anxiety-inducing.

Component of English that Causes the Most Anxiety

Theme	Code	Responses	Percentage
Part of English that causes the most anxiety	Speaking	80	57%
	Vocabulary	52	37%
	Listening comprehension	40	28%
	Grammar	39	27.6%
	Pronunciation	18	13%

Table 1. Which Part of English Causes You the Most Anxiety?

The result shows that oral communication and lack of vocabulary are one of the biggest stressors in the target language. Students are also hypersensitive to their grammar and grammatical faults, as learning correct grammar is a major priority in junior high and high schools. Additionally, it is intriguing that listening to the teacher and comprehending their peers, as well as not understanding their listening activities, are included in replies. All of these factors contribute to the nervousness and anxiety they experience in the classroom.

Anxiety Producing Speaking Activities

In order to understand stress inducers, our survey delved deeper into the reasons students experience anxiety and the activities that cause them the greatest discomfort.

Theme	Code	Responses	Percentage
Anxiety Producing Activities	Public Speaking	51	36%
	Conversations	39	28%

Table 2. What Speaking Activities Cause You the Most Anxiety?

Results support prior research showing that learners with high levels of anxiety are more likely to think and behave in ways that are not connected to the task, thus undermining their performance, (Sarason, Sarason and Pierce, 1990; Spielberger, 2013). Hence, students are likely to obtain a lower grade. Finally, students expressed that their greatest concern is the dread of the audience, which is tied to peer sentiments toward the speaker.

Causes of Anxiety in Speaking Activities

It is important for teachers to understand causes of anxiety in speaking activities so that they can make the necessary adjustments to help students overcome their anxieties and improve their English proficiency.

Theme	Code	Responses	Percentage
Causes of Anxiety in Speaking Activities	English Skills & Vocabulary	70	50%
	Negative Emotions	38	27%

Table 3. How/Why Do These Speaking Activities Cause You Anxiety?

Based on results, the majority of students experience negative feelings when they participate in speaking activities. According to Emi, "I worry about whether the other person will understand what I'm saying." Or another student Yuki wrote, "Because when I don't know what I want to say, I became panic." While 27 percent of students stated they lacked sufficient language knowledge (vocabulary and skill), this was the primary source of their speaking concerns. Another student commented that, "Because I care too much about grammar and I'm still having trouble listening to native English" [Yuria], or according to Ayano "English words do not come out." Each of these factors can result in making them feel more stressed while speaking English.

Activities Helpful/Useful to Language Learning

With regards to student beliefs about activities that are helpful to the language learning process, student responses centered around speaking, reading/writing/vocabulary, and listening activities.

Theme	Code	Responses	Percentage
Useful Activities for Language Learning	Speaking	81	57.8%
	Reading, Writing, and Vocabulary	20	14.3%
	Listening	12	12.1%

Table 4. Activities Helpful/Useful to Language Learning

Speaking

Although respondents find speaking to be among the most anxiety inducing activity in language learning, they also find this activity to be the most useful to the language learning process. For students, speaking activities are not only helpful for improving all language skills as a whole, but they offer the practice needed to better express themselves in the target language. Comments such as: "Speaking is contained the skills of listening comprehension, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, which means all we have to improve our English levels or skills is speaking and doing conversations" [Kazuki] or "Through these activities, I can practice listening to person's thought, telling my opinion and comparing it with mine" [Sakura], were common among respondents. In addition, students often see speaking activities as a source of connection to other cultures or people around the world: "Because it allows us to connect with people all over the world" [Ryousuke].

Reading, Writing, and Vocabulary

With regards to reading, writing, and vocabulary, students find that learning vocabulary is an essential base if seeking to develop language skills. According to one respondent: “because learning vocabularies makes me reading English sentences easy and it expand the width of expressions in English. And if I speak much English in daily lives, I could speak English more natural and tell others my all feelings and ideas like speaking Japanese” [Miku]. This was a sentiment that several students expressed, as they consider vocabulary to be a key feature in language learning, therefore they found activities such as reading to be helpful to vocabulary acquisition.

Listening

Finally, students also noted that listening activities were useful to the language learning process. Some students find that these are helpful to understanding a speaker on a deeper level. “Because if I will be good at listening and hearing, I am able to understand what a speaker says or how a speaker thinks when I talk to people even if I can't express my opinion well” [Yuki]. While others stated that listening to native English speakers assists them in learning “natural” speech patterns. “Because I can learn about natural English conversation” [Haruka].

Strategies to Reduce Anxiety

The final section of the questionnaire focused on strategies students themselves use in reducing learner anxiety. Based on results, there are four main strategies learners utilize.

Theme	Code	Responses	Percentage
Strategies for Reducing Anxiety	Practice & Preparation	50	35.7%
	Positive Attitude	30	21.4%
	Improve Vocabulary/Language	28	20%
	Asking for Help/Support	6	4.3%

Table 5. Strategies Used to Reduce Anxiety

Practice & Preparation

According to the findings, students felt that practice and preparation were helpful in reducing anxiety. Comments such as: “Before beginning to speak, I try to organize my thoughts” [Takuma], “I get used to it by increasing the chances of talking” [Kirari], and “I communicate in English more actively, and I get used to speak in English” [Haruto] were among the responses given. Students find that practice and preparation not only helps them to organize their thoughts, but it allows them to get used to speaking in the target language, which increases their level of confidence, thereby mitigating levels of anxiety and encouraging them to be more proactive.

Positive Attitude

Student strategies for maintaining a positive attitude were among the most interesting results in this study. Although students cited the ‘fear of making mistakes,’ and ‘lack of confidence,’ as the greatest sources of anxiety, they also maintained that not worrying about mistakes, and approaching an activity with a confident attitude, were key to reducing anxiety. Comments such as: “ I try to speak a lot and I don’t mind mistakes” or “I’m not afraid mistakes,” and “To be confident” or “ Keep smiling,” were common.

Improve Vocabulary/Language & Asking for Help/Support

Finally, students cited both improving vocabulary, as well as asking for help, as helpful strategies for reducing anxiety. Because students find the inability to express their opinions due to the lack of the necessary vocabulary, as a great source of anxiety, it is unsurprising that improving vocabulary is seen as a useful strategy in mitigating these feelings. And in situations where students have difficulty expressing their views, they find great comfort in receiving support from their fellow classmates. Thus, having a supportive environment in which students feel at ease asking for assistance is beneficial.

Limitations

The key drawback of this study was the participation size. While the insights acquired are valuable, the study might benefit from a larger study size. In addition, data was collected from a single survey conducted in the middle of the first semester, so a study conducted over a longer period of time, and with regular surveys, may have produced differing results. Finally, all survey questions were written in English, prompting students to submit their answers in English. Had students been provided with a questionnaire that offered Japanese translations, not only would it ensure that participants fully understood the intent and meaning of the question, but it may have encouraged participants to provide more thorough responses.

Recommendations

Given the results of the study, authors offer two potential strategies for helping mitigate student anxiety in the classroom. The two recommended methods include using humour, and/or using music in the classroom. Both of these strategies are useful in helping students relax, thereby reducing speaking apprehension. This has the potential of encouraging the learner to speak more, and in so doing, increase their linguistic performance. In addition, using humor and/or music in the classroom can foster an enjoyable learning environment, which could play a critical role in overcoming tension and uneasiness, therefore making students more receptive to learning. As a result, these activities may help in building group cohesion, bridging the language gap, and making the learning process more successful.

According to Berk (2002) humor is vital for the two most essential ingredients in education, namely the lecturer-student relationship and engaged learning. Humor creates a positive relationship between teachers and students, it reduces stress and tension in the classroom, facilitates learning, supports good retention, develops creativity, and streamlines teaching in general. Mistakes are a natural part of learning, thus to build an environment where mistakes are accepted rather than feared, humour can be a helpful tool. As Pretorius, Koen & Schall (2020) stated “When students are smiling, they will be more motivated to engage in learning”. Thus, by incorporating humor in lessons, by assigning groups to create a funny joke in English

and share it with the class, by tasking students to find a joke online and translating, or even displaying a funny sitcom in English will infuse the classroom with a sense of humor that students will appreciate and pique student interest in learning.

With regards to music, this activity can be used in several ways. The first is as a form of ice-breaker. When students are reluctant to speak in class, the instructor could play music and ask students to speak over the sound of music to ensure their speaking partner can hear what they are trying to say. Students often find this activity amusing, quickly building a sense of comradery with their partner (due to a shared moment of humor), allowing them to set aside some of their apprehensions about speaking in the target language. The second method of using music in the classroom is using it during discussion periods as general background music. This allows students to focus on their speaking partner and conversation, instead of classroom sounds (or lack thereof) around them.

Conclusions

This study showed that students are anxious about speaking activities such as presentation and conversations. In addition, students are concerned about their grammar accuracy, vocabulary usage, pronunciation, and meaning to be understood when speaking English in the classroom. Interestingly, activities students find the most anxiety inducing are also thought to be the most useful in language learning. However, students find that practice and preparation helps them to reduce these anxieties. Although the classroom environment will never be anxiety-free, an awareness of the activities that cause the most anxiety can help instructors try to mitigate these anxieties. While it is unreasonable to expect instructors to be able to control all anxiety producing factors, it is important to recognize the complexities that are at play in a foreign language situation, as they may be more nuanced than expected. Both humor and music may not only help teachers create a positive and effective learning environment but also serve as a source of enjoyment. By reducing anxiety and tension, students can take on further risks and challenges in their language learning.

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Appendix-A

Questionnaire

Part A: Background Information

1. Name
2. Sex
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Other
3. School Year
 - a. First-Year
 - b. Second-Year
4. University Major
 - a. EIBEI
 - b. English Communication
5. At what age did you start learning English?
6. What is the second foreign language you are learning?
 - a. Arabic
 - b. Chinese
 - c. French
 - d. German
 - e. Indonesian
 - f. Italian
 - g. Korean
 - h. Portuguese
 - i. Russian
 - j. Spanish
 - k. Thai
 - l. Other

Part B: Communication Ability

1. How confident do you feel expressing yourself verbally in Japanese?
 - a) extremely confident
 - b) confident
 - c) a little confident
 - d) not very confident
 - e) no confidence
2. How confident do you feel expressing yourself verbally in English?
 - a) extremely confident
 - b) confident
 - c) a little confident

- d) not very confident
- e) no confidence

Part C: Learner Experience & Beliefs

1. Does your teacher affect your language learning experience?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
- 2a. Do you ever feel anxious/nervous when expressing yourself in English?
(If yes, please answer question 2b)
- 2b. If you answered “Yes” to question 2a, please share why?
- 3a. What speaking activities cause you the most anxiety?
- 3b. How/Why do these speaking activities cause you anxiety?
4. Which part of English causes the most anxiety?
 - a. speaking
 - b. listening comprehension
 - c. grammar
 - d. pronunciation
 - e. vocabulary
5. What activities are the most useful to you for learning English?
6. How/Why are these activities useful?
7. What strategies do you do to reduce your speaking anxiety?