Controlling the Level of Anxiety in L2 Presentation Performance:
Case Study of EFL Students in Japan

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Abstract
The main objective of this research is to investigate the impact of pedagogical techniques involving L1 on reducing anxiety in L2 presentation performances among Japanese university students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). In our English presentation class, seventeen EFL students gave a short presentation in English based on homework in which they write short paragraphs on how to persuade the audience to purchase a product of their choice. The in-class presentation consisted of three stages: First, students gave a presentation in English; then they gave the same presentation in L1, which students were not previously informed of; finally, students gave the same presentation as in the initial round. All three stages of their presentations were evaluated per the following four categories: Content, language (accuracy, comprehensibility), non-verbal performance and overall performance. The result showed that student performance in L2 was improved through the technique of L1 presentation, where the language anxiety factor is removed. In comparing pre- and post-treatment stages, specifically, it was found that positive experience with reduced anxiety in the medial stage led to enhance performance in the final stage.

Keywords: Foreign Language Speaking, L2 Speaking Anxiety, EFL Pedagogy

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1. Introduction

This research explores pedagogical techniques aimed at improving L2 speaking performances by incorporating L1-involved practice prior to engaging in L2 speaking activities. The research focuses on Japanese university students enrolled in an English public speaking course, and data was gathered through video-recorded presentations in both L1 and L2. The analysis primarily centers on nonverbal performances relevant to L2 speaking anxiety. The findings reveal that content-focused speaking activities, particularly using L1 before L2 presentations, have the potential to alleviate anxiety and improve L2 speaking skills. The pilot task conducted during this study has some limitations; however, we hope that educators can apply the methods employed in their foreign language classrooms to help reduce language anxiety and public speaking anxiety experienced by L2 learners.

2. Background

2.1 L2 Oral Presentation Anxiety

Success in the academic and professional environment necessitates clear communication in spoken English. Consequently, many EFL classrooms in Japan incorporate oral presentations as a learner-centered activity to enhance students' communicative competence. However, previous studies have indicated that oral tasks are particularly anxiety-provoking for foreign language learners (Horwitz et al., 1986). Gregerson (2008) observed limited facial activity, reduced eye contact, and closed posture in anxious learners. Anxiety levels are often reported to be higher in Asian contexts like Japan (Williams and Andrade, 2008). Additionally, gender has been identified as a factor influencing foreign language classroom anxiety, with male students exhibiting higher levels of anxiety than female students (Kitano, 2001; Awan et al., 2010). Given that a majority of our students are engineering majors and male, we can surmise that speaking activities pose significant challenges in their English language learning.

2.2 Anxiety-Provoking Factors in L2 Speaking

Numerous factors contribute to anxiety during L2 speaking, including fear of making mistakes, negative evaluation, being laughed at, lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, imperfect pronunciation, low proficiency, lack of practice, personality traits, family background, and low self-confidence (Liu, 2006; Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017). However, if students concentrate on the content they are conveying rather than the language forms, the pressure of L2 speaking might be mitigated. Content-Based Instruction (CBI) aligns with this assumption, as it advocates for teaching content or information in the language being learned without explicit and separate language instruction. Rather than isolating language learning from content, CBI integrates language acquisition within meaningful subject matter, allowing learners to engage with the target language in a more authentic and purposeful context (Heo, 2006). It is grounded on the assumption that learners benefit most when language learning is presented in a meaningful and contextualized manner, with a primary emphasis on acquiring information. This approach shifts the focus away from solely addressing pronunciation, grammar, and sentence structure during language instruction. Instead, learners are encouraged to concentrate on the content they aim to convey, potentially alleviating the pressure associated with L2 speaking. Furthermore, this instructional method is not limited to comprehension and expression of content; it extends to producing utterances as well. In this context, the focus shifts from merely teaching the subject matter to guiding students to concentrate on the *what* of their communication, rather than solely on the *how*. By emphasizing the content of their message, learners may experience reduced

language-related anxiety and greater confidence in their L2 speaking abilities. As such, this study aims to investigate how incorporating content-focused speaking activities, such as using L1 (first language) before L2 (second language) presentations, can contribute to reducing anxiety and improving L2 speaking skills among Japanese university students in the EFL (English as a foreign language) context.

2.3 Relaxed L1 Presentation as a Successful Experience Boosting Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their own ability to accomplish specific tasks or achieve goals. It was introduced by Bandura (1997), who emphasized the role of self-belief in boosting confidence. Among the four sources of self-efficacy (Mastery experiences, Vicarious experiences, Verbal persuasions and Affective indicators), Bandura claims that "Mastery experiences" are the most influential source of efficacy information. When you succeed at something, it boosts your confidence and belief in yourself. Successes make you feel more capable. On the other hand, if you experience failure, it can lower your confidence and self-belief. We believe that L2 learners' boosted confidence and relaxed attitude during the L1 presentation phase, leading to a successful experience of giving a presentation, can raise the self-efficacy of the participants and result in better performance in the final presentation in L2.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Participants in this study were 15 Japanese university students, 1 Vietnamese student and 1 Chinese student enrolled in an English public speaking course ("Presentation Skills"). The students were engineering majors and exhibited varying levels of English proficiency. The two international students from Vietnam and China exhibited higher proficiency in English compared to their Japanese classmates as they had to reach certain level of English to be able to be admitted to a Japanese university. They were proficient also in Japanese.

3.2 Procedure

The course ran for fourteen weeks, with two 100-minute sessions per week. In Week 12, participants were asked to give a short presentation in English based on a homework assignment in which they wrote short paragraphs persuading the audience to purchase a marker. The in-class presentations comprised three stages:

Phase 1. Initial presentation in English (L2)
Phase 2. (Uninformed) presentation in Japanese (L1 for most students)
Phase 3. (Uninformed) final presentation in English (L2) again

We had seventeen students in total, who could participate in this activity in class and we made a pair to present together, so we had a total of nine groups, with one group, one student was missing.

3.3 Analysis

The presentations were video-recorded and evaluated using criteria for content, language, nonverbal performance, and peer evaluation, with a particular focus on nonverbal behaviors associated with L2 speaking anxiety (Table 1).

Category	Items	Descriptors	2	1	0
Content (6 points)	Coherence	Contains clear introduction, body and conclusion Information presented in a logical sequence Easy to follow			
	Content	Providing relevant information Presenting supporting/convincing description/argument Creative use of presentational aids (e.g., visual aids)			
	Length	Presentation is completed within the time assigned (Neither too short nor too long).			
Delivery (Presentation) – Verbal (10 points)	Comprehensibility	Overall intelligibility on part of audience			
	Accuracy (grammar, range of vocab)	Correct use of grammar Wide range of vocabulary			
	Speech rate/ Speed	Presentation at an appropriate speed (Neither too fast nor too slow)			
	Spontaneity/ ad lib	Spontaneous speech beyond the script Spontaneous use of presentational aids			
	Voice volume & clarity	Appropriate volume of voice Clarity of voice			
Delivery (Presentation) – Non-verbal (10 points)	Body language	Natural gesture (use of hand) Confident body posture (open posture throughout)			
	Eye contact	Eye contacts with audience, without looking down or away. (Frequency and proportion to the whole presentation)			
	Spoken, not read	Presentation in the spoken manner, not reading mode (% of relying on the script prepared)			
	Inter-speaker communication	Cooperative manner to make it as one presentation Mutual communication during the presentation			
	Overall naturalness	Overall impression of the presentation being natural, engaging, and persuasive			
Reception by Audience (4 points)	Peer feedback	Questionnaire result			
	Engaging the audience	Engaging the audience throughout the presentation Use of humor			

Table 1: Evaluation criteria

For the analysis in this study, we measured the length of their presentations for three different stages, and the number of their nonverbals such as eye contact with the audience, hand gesture and hand gesture per 10 seconds.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Presentation Duration

Below is one sample student presentation transcribed from the video (P1).

A: *We got the new marker ... markers we are using.* [Brief eye contact]
B: *Look at these three markers. Suppose this marker A.*
We use this marker everyday. You can use it for long time. ...
Thus, it is not easy for... Here is marker B.
[Eye contact] *It is easy to hold it because the size fits your hand.*
[Eye contact] *It is not easy for people to use it for long time.*
A: *Finally, this is a new marker.* [Pointing at B's marker]
The size of this marker is …[Eye contact] *It is easy to use.*
We can use .. for a long time with a new marker. [Brief eye contact]
On the other was, new marker has merits over marker A and B.

Do you want to buy it?
[Audience laugh]
That's it for today. Thanks for listening.

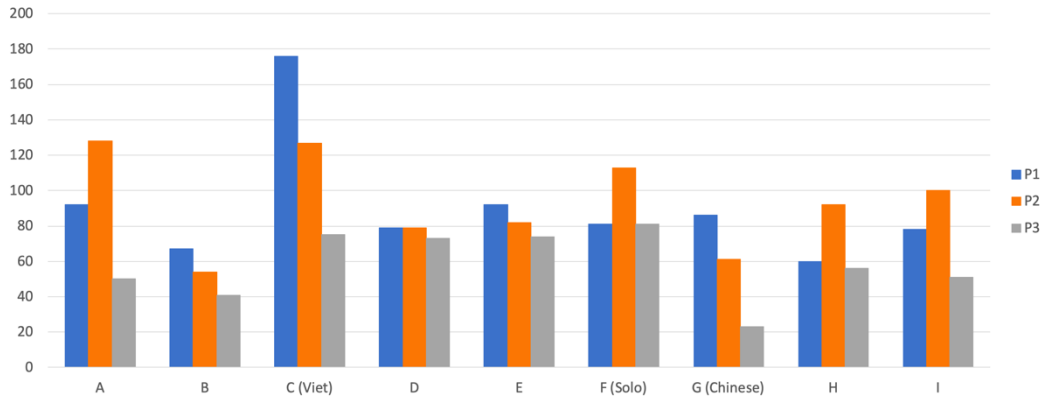Their video recordings for three different phrases were first measured in length.

Figure 1: Presentation duration (in seconds)

Figure 1 shows the change in presentation duration for nine groups from Group A to I. The blue bar is the very first presentation in English. Orange bar shows the second one in Japanese (L1 for most students). The last gray bar indicates the length of their final English (L2) presentation, which they were asked to give without reading their original script. There are inter-group variations as to which one is the longest or shortest. The analysis of presentation duration indicates that students' third presentation (P3), conducted in English without the script, was the shortest. This reduction in duration is expected, considering that students had to recall the content from memory without referencing the script.

4.2 Nonverbal Cues During the Presentation

Although their presentations were the shorted in length for their final rounds in L2 English, participants demonstrated increased eye contact and engaged more in hand gestures during the second and third presentations as shown in Figures 2 through 4, showcasing a higher level of comfort with their L2-speaking skills.
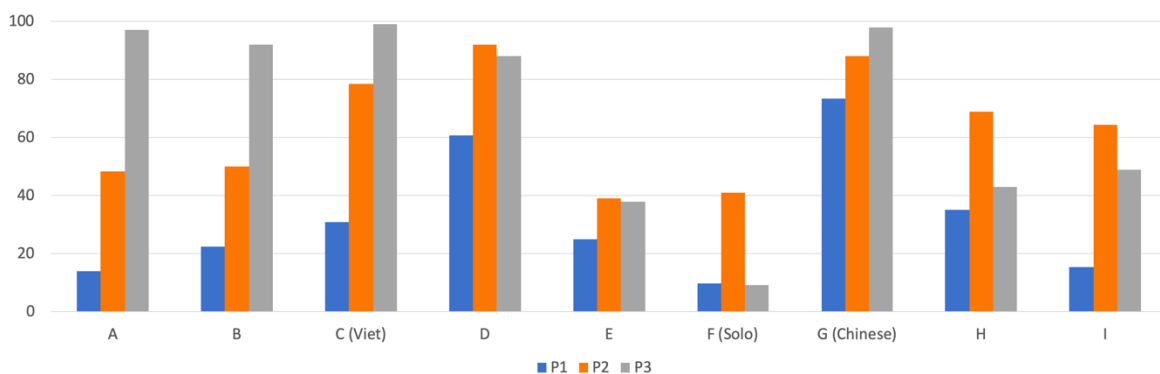

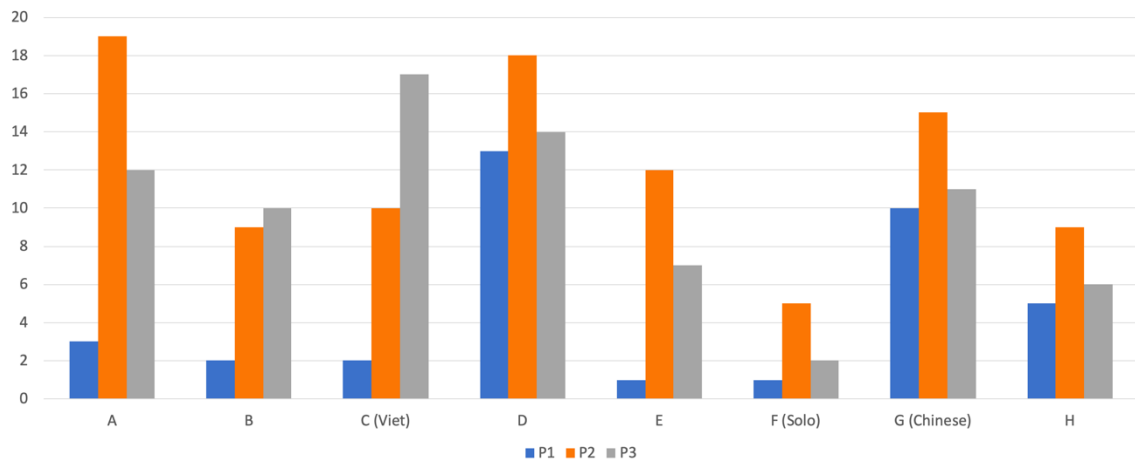Figure 2: Change in the percentage of eye contacts
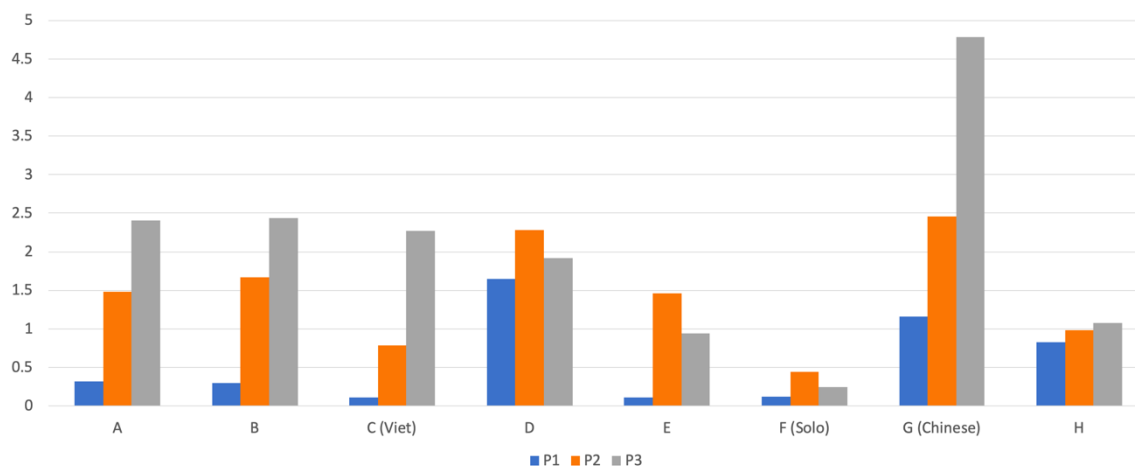
Figure 3: Number of hand gesture

Figure 4: Number of hand gesture per 10 seconds

Moreover, students tended to provide more detailed explanations during their presentations in L1, and they became more interactive with the audience, incorporating humor and jokes. Positive experiences with reduced anxiety during the L1 stage appeared to lead to more relaxed and confident performances in the final L2 stage (Bandura 1997).

5. Conclusions

Learning English as a foreign language can be challenging, especially for students with limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom. The use of content-focused speaking activities, particularly L1 presentations before L2, has the potential to mitigate language anxiety and improve L2 speaking skills. Encouraging collaboration among students can create a supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere, enabling students to feel more comfortable expressing themselves in English. The research findings provide insights for educators to consider implementing similar techniques in their classrooms to enhance language learning experiences and reduce anxiety associated with L2 speaking.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, the sample size was relatively small, with 17 participants from various engineering majors. A larger and more diverse sample could provide more robust insights. Additionally, the study was conducted in a controlled classroom setting, and the findings may not fully capture the complexities of real-life language

use. Further research in authentic contexts could offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of L1-based techniques in reducing L2 speaking anxiety. Lastly, the study focused on nonverbal performances related to anxiety; future studies should consider incorporating verbal aspects to provide a comprehensive assessment of anxiety reduction techniques.

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