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Foreign Language Learning Anxiety in Japanese EFL University Classes: Causes, Coping, and Locus of Control

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Abstract

The effect of anxiety on foreign language learning has been the subject of a growing body of research, which has focused mostly on students studying foreign languages in the United States and Canada. The present study, in contrast, examined anxiety in Japanese university EFL classes in regard to the type of situations that provoked the anxiety, the perceived cause of the anxiety, and the ability to cope with the anxiety. Based on questions used in a cross-cultural study of emotion responses (Matsumoto, Kudoh, Scherer, & Wallbott, 1988), a survey was conducted among 243 Japanese learners in 31 conversational English classes at four-year universities in Japan. Findings indicated that anxiety was most often associated with the output and processing (in the sense of mental planning) stages of the learning process and that students attributed the cause of anxiety to the teacher or other people. Other findings were that the effect of and response to anxiety were associated with gender and perceived ability level.

1 Introduction

Foreign language learning anxiety has been the subject of a growing body of research that indicates anxiety routinely affects many language learners. Although in the past there were few studies of classroom anxiety of Asian learners, the number of such studies has been growing (see Table 1). The findings of this research as a whole indicate that foreign language learning anxiety is equally prevalent among Japanese and other Asian learners. The present study aims to contribute to this body of research by seeking to more specifically identify both the situations that provoke anxiety and the coping mechanisms that Japanese university English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) students used when they experienced this anxiety. In addition, it investigated the Japanese learner's perception of locus of control[1] with regard to the anxiety-provoking situations, a topic that has received little attention in the literature. On the basis of the findings of this study, we offer suggestions on ways that classroom anxiety can be reduced or prevented. In this paper, the expression "foreign language learning" refers to the formal study of a foreign language in a classroom setting.

Researcher	Subjects	Findings
Brown, Robson, & Rosenkjar (2001)	320 Japanese university students in Japan	Students who had higher scores on a cloze test tended to have high anxiety scores on the FLCAS (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), contrary to what would be expected.*
Burden (2004)	289 Japanese students in the university conversation classes	About half of the 289 Japanese students suffered from anxiety similar to what Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope found in their 1991 study of American foreign language students.
Hashimoto (2002)	56 Japanese students at a university in the United States	Anxiety exerted a strong influence on perceived competence and negatively affected their willingness to communicate.
Jackson (2002)	168 Chinese students in English-medium business classes at a university in Hong Kong,	A combination of anxiety, cultural, and personal factors contributed to the lack of participation in discussions.
Kondo & Yang (2003)	148 university students in Japan	Classroom anxiety was associated with three main factors: low proficiency, speaking activities, and fear of negative evaluation by classmates.
Osboe, Fujmura, & Hirschel (2007)	62 first-year university students	There was a positive correlation between low anxiety and utilization of small group activities in oral English classes.
Tajima (2002)	84 Japanese university students in Japan	There were differences in anxiety levels between majors and non-majors on the one hand, and students whose previous experiences included having native-speaking friends, traveling abroad, and passing standardized achievement tests on the other.
Takada (2003)	148 first-year Japanese junior high school students	Anxiety levels and motivation were unrelated to previous English language study in elementary school.
Yamashiro & McLaughlin (2001)	220 Japanese junior college and university students in Japan	Higher levels of anxiety tend to indicate lower levels of proficiency and a higher level of motivation may lead to a higher level of anxiety, which in turn may lead to a lower level of proficiency

* Because these learners were enrolled in an intensive English for Academic Purposes program at an American university branch campus in Japan, they were not representative of the typical Japanese university EFL students.

Table 1: Research on Foreign Language Learning Anxiety of Asian Students

2 Background

There are particular characteristics of formal foreign language learning that have the potential for provoking anxiety in learners. For example, language learning anxiety has been attributed to the inability to present one's ideas and opinions as well as one can in the target language, which can undermine self-esteem and threaten one's self-image (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). In addition, the inability to pronounce words correctly or use correct grammar can lead to negative evaluation (real or perceived) by others. Moreover, confusion and embarrassment may result from the inability to comprehend spoken and written input. These types of anxiety contribute to making formal foreign language learning a particularly unpleasant experience for many learners (Horwitz & Young, 1991; Horwitz, 2001; Young, 1999).

Research has examined many variables related to foreign language learning anxiety. These variables fall into two main categories: *situational variables* and *learner variables.* Situational variables include, for example, course level, course organization, course activities, instructor behavior and attitudes, and social interaction among learners (Jackson, 2002; Oh, 1992; Oxford, 1999a; Samimy, 1989; Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001; Young, 1991). Learner variables include, ability (both perceived and actual), age, attitudes, beliefs, culture, gender, learning styles, and personality variables among others (Brown, Robson, & Rosenkjar, 2001; Campbell, 1999; Dewaele, 2002; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Gardner, Day, & MacIntyre, 1992; Gardner, Smythe, & Brunet, 1977; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Oxford, 1999b). These independent variables interact in complex ways that create anxiety-provoking situations for many students.

In addition to the multiple variables mentioned above, another complexity of classroom anxiety is that it may occur during one or more stages in the learning process. These stages are *input, processing (mental planning),* and *output.* In experimental studies, researchers have investigated the effect of induced anxiety during each of these stages as well as the relationship between this anxiety and the ability, character traits, gender, and other learner or situational variables (Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, & Daley, 2000; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999). Thus, to understand foreign language learning anxiety in classrooms, we need to look at not only what provokes it (the causes) but also how it affects the stages of the learning process.

Another aspect of classroom anxiety to take into consideration is how learners cope with it. Because coping has not been discussed much in the EFL literature, it is necessary to look at related research in other fields. Of particular interest, is a study by Matsumoto, Kudoh, Scherer, and Wallbott (1988), who compared the emotional responses of Japanese and Americans university students to emotion-eliciting events involving anger, disgust, fear, guilt, joy, sadness, and shame. The goal of their study was to evaluate four aspects of the emotional process: (1) the ecology of emotional experience, (2) the regulation and control of emotion, (3) the subjective evaluation of emotion-eliciting events, and (4) the verbal, nonverbal, and physiological reactions. One finding was that the American participants tended to attribute the cause of the event to other people, whereas the Japanese counterparts tended to attribute it to chance or life. Another difference between the groups was that more Japanese than Americans believed that in the emotion-eliciting events investigated no action was necessary. The researchers concluded that "this finding is consistent with the findings about attribution of responsibility for the event: if one is reluctant to make an attribution of responsibility, or attributes responsibility to other forces, then one's coping ability is limited, and is reflected in the belief that no action is necessary" (Matsumoto et al., 1988, p. 279).

3 Research questions

The aim of the present study is to identify and rank the situations that provoke anxiety in Japanese university EFL classes, in particular conversational English classes. In addition, it seeks to identify the ways students perceive and cope with these situations. Specifically, the following questions are addressed:

1. What specific classroom situations provoke anxiety?
2. Who or what do the students think is responsible for the anxiety?
3. How do the students cope with the anxiety?

4 Method

4.1 Participants

The participants were 243 randomly selected students at six private universities in Japan.[2] All were first- and second-year non-English majors enrolled in 31 conversational English courses taught by 6 native speakers of English. Classes ranged in size from 20 to 30 students, were coeducational, and were not divided by ability level. Ages of the students in the sample ranged from 18 to 21. There were 132 males and 111 females. The amount of exposure to English and speakers of English outside of the classroom was not assessed; however, English was a required subject on the universities' entrance examinations, and Japanese university students have typically studied English in junior and senior high school for a total of six years.

4.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study was an abbreviated version of the questionnaire Matsumoto et al. (1988) used to compare differences in emotional responses between Japanese and Americans. The questions (see Appendix) were adapted for the foreign language learning context and translated into Japanese. They were then tested with a target group of 50 first- and second-year university students. Based on feedback from the students and colleagues, revisions were made, and the revised Japanese version was back translated into English to check for accuracy.

4.3 Procedure

Students in the 31 classes completed the questionnaire during class time midway through the first semester. The questionnaire did not ask for any information that could be used to identify individual students. The students were informed that the survey would have no effect on their grade.

4.4 Data analysis

After incomplete questionnaires were eliminated from the initial pool of 260, 243 remained for analysis. First, the two authors of this paper read the open-ended responses in which the students described situations that provoked the anxiety. Then they worked together to establish categories and a coding scheme to ensure intercoder agreement (Brown, 2001). The results were summarized (see Table 2) and descriptive statistics were prepared for the question concerning responsibility (see Table 3), the students' perceived ability levels (see Tables 3, 4 and 5), and the distribution of coping responses (see Table 6). Finally, a chi-square test was used to determine if there were any significant differences attributable to gender or perceived ability in the distribution of coping responses.

Rank order	Causes of anxiety	No. of students	% of students	Category of anxiety
1	Did not know how to say something in English	32	12.99	processing
2	Speaking in front of others	30	12.15	output
3	Worried about pronunciation	25	10.45	output
4	Being called on by teacher and waiting one's turn	23	9.32	input
5	Worried about grammatical mistakes	19	7.91	processing
6	Did not know how to respond to the teacher's question	16	6.78	processing
7	Confused between English and Japanese	16	6.50	processing
8	Embarrassed to use simple or broken English	15	6.21	output
9	(Reason not clearly stated)	12	5.08	–
10	Did not understand teacher's question or comment	11	4.52	input
11	Worried if one's English is understood or not	10	4.24	output
12	Could not respond quickly or smoothly	7	2.82	output
13	Remained silent (mind went blank)	6	2.54	processing
14	Talking with unfamiliar classmates	4	1.69	input
15	Worried about one's ability level compared to others	4	1.69	input
16	Did not understand other students	3	1.41	input
17	Talking about personal affairs	2	0.85	output
18	Had no idea or opinion about the topic	2	0.85	processing
19	Misunderstood teacher's question	1	0.56	input
20	Role-play	1	0.28	output
21	Did not understand spoken English	1	0.28	input
22	Did not understand long written sentences	1	0.28	input
23	Did not do homework	1	0.28	output
24	First encounter with a native English teacher	1	0.28	input
	Totals	243	100	–

Table 2: Causes of anxiety reported by the students

	Self	Teacher	School	Friends	Relative	Fate	Chance	Stranger	Other	Total
f	34	123	24	15	2	10	21	7	7	243
%	13.99	50.61	9.87	6.17	0.82	4.11	8.64	2.88	2.88	100

Table 3: Perceived responsibility for the anxiety (n = 243)

	1 (low)	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 (high)	Total
f	52	51	45	43	32	11	6	3	243
%	21.40	20.99	18.35	17.70	13.17	4.53	2.47	1.23	100

Notes. M = 3.11, SD = 1.69, percentages rounded

Table 4: Perceived ability level (n = 243)

	Male	Female	High ability	Low ability	High male	High female	Low male	Low female	All
n	132	111	20	148	12	8	87	61	243
M	3.01	3.21	6.59	1.96	6.67	6.50	1.93	1.98	3.11
SD	1.76	1.62	0.77	0.80	0.78	0.76	0.79	0.81	1.69

Notes. "low ability" = Likert scale 1-3, "high ability" = Likert scale 6-8 (see Table 2)

Table 5: Distribution of perceived ability level by gender (n = 243)

	All	Male	Female	High	Low
N	243	132	111	20	148
Question 3-1: "I did not think that any action was necessary."					
Agree	45 (18.52)	24 (18.18)	21(18.92)	3 (15.00)	25 (16.89)
Disagree	198 (81.48)	108 (81.82)	90 (81.08)	17(85.00)	123 (83.11)
Question 3-2: "I believed that I could positively influence the event and change the consequences."					
Agree	60 (24.69)	39 (29.55)	21(18.92)	9(45.00)**	29(19.59)**
Disagree	183 (75.31)	93(70.45)	90(81.08)	11(55.00)**	119 (80.41)**
Question 3-3: "I believed that I could escape from the situation and avoid negative consequences."					
Agree	99 (40.74)	53 (40.15)	46 (41.44)	12 (60.00)**	48 (32.43)**
Disagree	144 (59.26)	79 (59.85)	65 (58.56)	8 (40.00)**	100 (67.57)**
Question 3-4: "I pretended that nothing important had happened and tried to think of something else."					
Agree	80 (33.06)	34 (25.76)**	46 (41.44) **	4 (20.00)	52 (35.14)
Disagree	163 (67.08)	98 (74.24)**	65 (58.55) **	16 (80.00)	96 (64.86)
Question 3-5: "I saw myself as powerless and dominated by the event and its consequences."					
Agree	99 (40.74)	56 (42.42)	43 (38.74)	2 (10.00)*	67 (45.27) *
Disagree	144 (59.25)	76 (57.58)	68 (61.26)	18 (90.00)*	81 (54.73) *

Notes. ( ) = percentage, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ level (chi-square)

Table 6: Distribution of coping reactions

5 Results and discussion

5.1 Situations that provoke classroom anxiety

The situations that provoked anxiety as reported in the open-ended question are summarized in Table 2. Anxiety for these learners was most often associated with processing (mental planning) and output-related tasks. Fear of making a bad impression or receiving negative evaluation associated with the inability to express oneself clearly and correctly was the most often cited sources of anxiety. Connected to this fear was the feeling that one was less capable than other students in the course. These results are consistent with those reported by Burden (2004), who studied a similar population of Japanese EFL learners, and Kondo and Yang (2003). Overall, anxiety related to processing and output accounted for 75% of the total number of anxiety-provoking situations reported. In this regard, the Japanese students were similar to American students in that they tended to experience anxiety as a result of not being able to achieve a goal, specifically the desire to express themselves effectively (Matsumoto et al., 1988).

Specifically, anxiety was often associated with tasks involving speaking in front of others. Most commonly mentioned was having to stand before a class to deliver a prepared speech either by reading aloud or from memory. In particular, having to deliver a self-introduction at the beginning of the course, either in front of the class in a small group, was frequently mentioned as a source of high anxiety. Also frequently mentioned was feeling uncomfortable when being stared at by other students while speaking. In this case, the students were especially uncomfortable with the long silences that occurred while they were trying to think of something to say. Speaking in front of others in small groups or pairs, however, was less a problem or not a problem at all if the participants knew each other well. Other common sources of discomfort were not being able to express what one wanted to say, having to use simple or broken English, making grammatical mistakes, and concern about incorrect pronunciation. Not knowing how to respond to the teacher's question was also a source of anxiety even though the content of the question was understood.

Another source of anxiety was the procedure the teacher used for calling on students. Some students reported anxiety when the teacher used random selection, complaining that they always felt on edge not knowing when or if they would be called on. On the other hand, when the teacher called on the students in a predictable order, other students reported increasing anxiety as their turn approached. Perhaps a predictable order would provoke less anxiety for the class as a whole, but we cannot say if the intensity of anxiety is more or less in one case or the other based on this study.

To deal with these sources of anxiety, situational interventions involving both classroom activities and teacher behavior have been discussed, for example, ways of effectively presenting input and correcting errors (Burden, 2004; Campbell & Ortiz, 1991; Daley 1991; Lucas, 1984; Phillips, 1999; Powell, 1991; Spielmannn & Radnofsky, 2001; Stroud & Wee, 2006; Vande Berge, 1993; Vogely, 1998; Young, 1991; Young 1999). Although it is clear from studies such as these that foreign language learning anxiety can be effectively managed, the experience of Koch and Terrell (1991) shows that there is no universal solution.[3] Generally speaking, however, activities that relate to the learner on a personal level and raise the learner's feeling of confidence provoke less anxiety and create a greater degree of comfort. Confidence-building activities can take many forms. For example, learners can be given regular chances to utilize skills and knowledge they have already acquired, leaving them feeling "I can do that!" and "I know that!" In this regard, learners should have some flexibility in choosing tasks that they enjoy, find interesting, and showcase their individual strengths. Some learners enjoy the challenge of impromptu role-playing in front of the class, but others abhor it. The latter group might find it more to their liking to write an original dialogue and read it aloud in a small group. Learners need many opportunities to experience success in ways that they feel comfortable. These points are explored further by Oxford (1999a).

5.2 Who or what the students thought was responsible for the anxiety

In half the cases (50.61%), the students felt that the teacher was responsible for the anxiety-provoking situation (see Table 2). A distant second was the students themselves (13.99%). Considering that the sources of anxiety reported in Table 2 indicate output and expression as the main causes of student anxiety, fear of negative evaluation in the eyes of the teacher may be the explanation for this result. In contrast to Matsumoto et al. (1988), this data does suggest that Japanese students are not reluctant to attribute the cause of emotion-eliciting events to other people or themselves rather than to "chance" or "life" in general.

Whether or not the teachers were actually the cause of the anxiety is unknown, but teachers should not ignore the fact that the students thought so. In that regard, we suggest teachers keep in mind the situations that most commonly provoke anxiety (see Table 2) and consider ways they might modify their lesson plans and teaching techniques if anxiety appears to be a problem in their classes. For example, the teacher could increase the amount of wait-time for the learner to respond. Forcing the learners to respond before they are ready or leaving them in uncomfortable silence is likely to create anxiety. If the learners appear unable to respond, the teacher can provide hints and prompts to elicit a successful response. Second, if the learners still cannot come up with an appropriate answer, they can be taught to respond with utterances such as "I really don't know," followed by "Maybe someone else can answer that," or "Could you help me?" that would effectively avoid embarrassing silence. Teachers need to evaluate their learners and the goals of the class to decide what conversational strategies they need, teach them, and encourage the learners to use them. These expressions can be distributed as a handout, written on a blackboard, or posted on the classroom wall where they can be easily seen during the lesson. If the students have name cards on their desk, the expressions can be written on the back.

5.3 How the students coped with anxiety

In response to the anxiety-provoking situation, a large majority of the students (81.48%) indicated that they should have taken some action (see Table 6); however, a nearly equal number (75.31%) did not think they could positively influence the situation, and 59.26% did not think they could avoid the situation. Within this group, more high perceived ability students (45.00%) than low perceived ability students (19.59%) thought that they could influence the situation. Thus, for many students, there was a feeling that they should do something, but at the same time they felt

that whatever they might do would be ineffective. Consequently perhaps, two-thirds of the students (66.94%) could not ignore the situation or get it out of their minds easily, and 40.91% indicated that they felt powerless and dominated by the event. Interestingly though, a majority (59.09%) still maintained a feeling of control despite the general pessimism.

A chi-square test of the data found near-significant and significant male-female differences on the ability to influence and ignore the event. More males (29.55%) than females (18.92%) felt they could exert positive influence on the situation, and more females (41.82%) than males (25.76%) were able to put their minds on other things and pretend that nothing important had happened. A significant difference was also found between high and low perceived ability students for feelings of efficacy also emerged. Students with low perceived ability (45.27%) felt powerless and dominated by the event more often than students with high perceived ability (10.00%). Nevertheless, over half of the low perceived ability students (54.73%) maintained some feeling of control. This difference may be attributed to the fact that this question asked about perceived ability, not actual ability, so the gap between high and low actual ability in this study may not be so wide on average.

To cope with anxiety, several types of learner interventions have been suggested: cognitive restructuring, written reflection, relaxation training, skills and strategy training, and support groups (Crookall & Reitzel, 1991; Foss & Reitzel, 1988; McCoy 1979; Oxford 1999b; Price, 1999). Many students (81%) felt that they should have taken some action (but did not), and 75% believed they could not influence the anxiety-provoking situation they reported. Furthermore, the most common emotional reaction was that their mind went blank, and over a quarter of the students reported an inability to concentrate. One way of handling these problems is to provide students with conversational strategies to deal with situations that they feel they are unable to control. For example, native speakers of English may say, “That’s a good question,” when they are asked a question to which they do not know the answer, and they want time to gather their thoughts before they speak. Other responses such as “Could you repeat the question?” and “Could you give me a moment to think?” could also be effective fillers when their mind goes blank, and they are unable to concentrate. Further suggestions can be found in Phillips (1999).

6 Conclusion

This study addressed three research questions. The first sought to identify and rank the anxiety-provoking situations in the foreign language classroom. We found that students reported a wide variety of events. Among these, anxiety was most often associated with the output or processing stages of the learning process. Next, we sought to identify who or what the students thought was responsible for the anxiety. The majority of students attributed the cause of anxiety to the teacher or other people. The third question investigated how the students coped with anxiety. Most students felt frustrated and helpless, although students who perceived themselves as having higher ability indicated a greater sense of resilience. We think these findings have two main implications. To optimize desired outcomes for all learners, teachers should be aware of anxiety-provoking situations and take steps to minimize their negative impact. At the same time, learners may benefit from being explicitly taught how to cope with these situations. Many ways to prevent and manage foreign language learning anxiety have been reported. The complexity of teaching and learning, however, means that what may work in one case may not work in another. Further research on the actual effectiveness of these techniques in diverse classroom settings would be a welcome contribution to foreign language learning anxiety research. In closing, it should be noted that the results of this study are based on questionnaire data and not direct observation of student and teacher behavior in the classroom. Thus, we do not claim that anxiety the respondents attributed to the teachers was actually caused by what the teachers did or did not do in a specific situation.

Notes

[1] *Locus of control* is a term used in psychology to refer to who or what an individual believes is responsible for an outcome. An individual who thinks he/she is personally responsible for the outcome of an event is said to have *internal locus of control*, whereas an individual who thinks the outcome was determined by outside factors is said to have *external locus of control*.

[2] This group of participants was the subject of a two-part study conducted by the authors of the present paper. Results of the second part of the study, which investigates the physical, emotional, expressive, and verbal reactions of the participants to classroom anxiety, will be reported separately.

[3] Koch and Terrell (1991) observed that oral presentations, skits and role playing, and defining a word in the target language were the most anxiety producing for at least a fifth of the foreign language students in their study. In contrast, the activities that the learners reported being the most comfortable with were interviewing other students, imagining situations, and ranking preferences. Interestingly, they also found that the same activity could have the opposite in effect on different groups of students. Lack of error correction and lack of grammar instruction, while meant to lower anxiety, actually seemed to raise anxiety in many students. Similarly, about one half of the learners indicated that imagining situations was a comfortable activity, but about one-fifth considered it anxiety producing.

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Appendix: Questionnaire Items

1. **In as much detail as possible, please describe a situation or event in which you felt anxiety in an English conversation class.**

2. **Who do you think was responsible for this event in the first place?**
   Check one, the most important of the following:
   (1) ___yourself (6) ___ fate
   (2) ___your teacher (7) ___ chance
   (3) ___ the school (8) ___ strangers
   (4) ___ close friends (9) ___other things/people
   (5) ___ close relatives

3. **How did you evaluate your ability to act or to cope with the event and its consequences when you were first confronted with this situation?**
   Read each statement and agree or disagree by circling your choice.

   3-1 I did not think that any action was necessary..
   Agree Disagree

   3-2 I believed that I could positively influence the event and change the consequences.
   Agree Disagree

   3-3 I believed that I could escape from the situation and avoid negative consequences.
   Agree Disagree

   3-4 I pretended that nothing important had happened and tried to think of something else.
   Agree Disagree

   3-5 I saw myself as powerless and dominated by the event and its consequences.
   Agree Disagree

4. **How would you evaluate your English ability at the time of the situation or event you described above?**
   Circle one:
   (Poor) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 (Excellent)