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A Longitudinal Study on Anxiety and Confidence Among Japanese University Students Studying English

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ABSTRACT

This article details the results of a longitudinal qualitative study which sought to examine dynamics in Japanese students' self-reported anxiety, confidence regarding their English learning experiences and their attitudes to learning English. The data is drawn from responses from bi-annual interviews with three students from three different academically-tiered universities during their four years at university. The results demonstrate the variety of influences on learners from both inside and outside the learning environment that contribute to different levels of anxiety over time irrespective of academic tier. These include perceptions of breakthrough linguistic moments, student-student classroom interaction and the importance of the maintenance of vision of one's future English-speaking self. The research also demonstrates the benefits of longitudinal research based on narrative enquiry employing fewer numbers of students to uncover considered experiential data which can help reflect the dynamic nature of language study.

KEYWORDS: anxiety, confidence, longitudinal, qualitative, Japan

Introduction

Language anxiety has been called "fundamental to our understanding of how learners approach language learning, their expectations for success or failure, and ultimately why they continue or discontinue study" (Horwitz, 2001, p. 122), with Dörnyei and Ryan (2015, p.176) labelling its study as "…a kind of bellwether of various theoretical and methodological changes occurring in the field of L2 individual differences". Examinations of changing anxiety over time are not new, and some research has been carried out examining short-term fluctuations in anxiety through measurements of cognitive processes (MacIntyre & Serroul, 2014) and physiological changes (Gregersen et al., 2014), but few on more extended measurements of self-regarded changes to this emotion related to L2 learning. In response to this shortcoming, this research sought to examine fluctuations in L2 learner anxiety over an extended period of time. Anxiety in this study pertains to student enjoyment, or otherwise, of the language learning process both inside and outside the

featured universities, and student confidence in using English. The data presented is qualitative, with a view to better demonstrate reflective interpretation of students' contemporaneous notions regarding the language. The data is taken from a larger examination of changes in student motivation from the perspective of Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self-System (Cooke, 2021a).

Literature Review

Even Anxiety in language learning has been an active topic of research since the 1970's and 1980's heralded studies which placed more specialized examination of this emotion and its effects on second language acquisition (SLA). Most notably, Horwitz et al.'s (1986) ground-breaking study which described the development of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) scale. The findings in that study revealed the multifaceted nature of the concept of anxiety and highlighted the debilitating role that anxiety can play in SLA.

Perceived communicative competence in the L2 has been a consistent measure of anxiety examined in a number of studies such as Dewaele et al. (2008) and MacIntyre et al., (1997). Both these studies supported the idea that higher perceived competence can lead the learner to have lower anxiety and be more willing to communicate in the L2 as compared to the learner with higher anxiety. This combination was labelled by Clément (1986) as second language confidence (L2C). A later study by Sampasivam and Clément (2014), drawing on previous research, posited the value of regular contact with the L2, calling it "the main antecedent of L2C" (p.31), and vital in helping students to engender a notion of their ideal L2 speaking selves.

The ideal or possible L2 self construct forms an integral part of theories of the self, which have been abstracted from psychology and implemented into L2 motivation research (Dörnyei, 2005; 2009). A number of recent studies have further demonstrated the relationship between the ideal self and student anxiety (Papi & Khajavy, 2021; Sugawara and Sato, 2020). Sugawara and Sato (2020) examined the relationship of future self-guides and engagement with the L2 with motivated behavior among 154 Japanese university students. Their findings suggested a positive association between the ideal L2 self and "student happiness, cheerfulness and enjoyment in learning and using English" (p. 28) and showed that student conception of the ideal L2 self decreased student anxiety.

As noted in the introduction to this article, the data presented in this study is qualitative rather than quantitative in nature and consists of responses to questions related to student anxiety and confidence. As has been posited in studies which have sought to incorporate student voices in substantiating qualitative data, data collected from a purely qualitative perspective can be regarded as being somewhat soul-less in the way that an opinion regarding a topic as important in one's life as learning, can be reduced to a point on a scale, with outliers discarded before being presented as representatives of the whole. As Dewaele (2005) notes, in such a process, "one may lose sight of individual learners, with their unique, cultural, linguistic, psychological, social and cognitive characteristics…" (p. 3). A qualitative, emic approach, meanwhile, gives greater emphasis on the learner under study and their situational point of view. This is particularly relevant in a longitudinal

study, such as one regarding the plethora influences relating to, for example, motivational trajectories over extended periods.

With the intention of further examining changes in motivation in the form of student anxiety over an extended period of time, the following research question was created:

a) What commonalities and or differences regarding anxiety towards English learning can be observed over time among students from different-tiered Japanese universities?

Materials and Methods

Student and University Profiles

Japanese universities are commonly ranked by their *hensachi* score, in which scores indicate "how far from the statistical mean a typical student admitted to a given institution scores on a test" (Makino, 2016). A *hensachi* of 50 is seen as an indication of the average. Therefore, a university that has a *hensachi* of 55 suggests that above-average students typically enter the university. A *hensachi* of 45 means that students below the average also have a good chance of being accepted. The three universities in this study were chosen for their difference in their *hensachi* scores in an attempt to gauge a pattern among higher-, medium-, and lower- educational attainment level learners. In this paper, these universities will be referred to as Tiers 1, 2, and 3, with Tier 1 having the highest level on the *hensachi* system.

The following section gives a brief description of each institution, along with the *hensachi* for the department that the students were enrolled in. Reference to a number of these students and the cited institutions has been made in a previous paper examining different aspects of the original data (Cooke, 2021b).

A. Tier 1 hensachi: 50.0

Fuuka was recruited from the department of International Communication. In their first year, she and other students from this department were required to take eight English classes per week and six in their second year. In their third and fourth year of studies, students were able to take classes relating to English culture. The instruction of the English communication classes in these first two years was commonly carried out by non-Japanese proficient English speakers. The university features an award-winning self-access language centre.

B. Tier 2 hensachi: 40.0

Aoi was recruited from the faculty of Liberal Arts, specifically the Department of English Literature. Students in this course were required to take four English classes per week in their freshman and sophomore years. In their third year, they could take an English literature and culture course or could elect to join the faculty of English to study linguistics or applied linguistics. At the time of the study, students could reserve time for individual or group conversation practice with a proficient English speaker.

C. Tier 3 hensachi: 35-40

Tier 3 is a private university located in the north east of Japan. Eito from this university was required (as with all students) to take English grammar classes in his first and second year. The conversation class which Eito refers to was an elective class for freshman students only.

Data Collection

All universities in the study followed the traditional two 15-week semester format. The interviews were carried out twice a year over a four-year period. The first of each year's interviews were carried out in the third or fourth week of the first semester and the second in the thirteenth or fourteenth week of the second semester. The questions used in the interviews were the same for each interview and for each student. The interviews typically took between 15-30 minutes each time. Following the first interview, subsequent interviews commonly referenced previous student responses, requiring longer interview times. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed by student volunteers from the author's institution. The interviews were translated to English by the author. This translation was then verified by two Japanese English instructors from the author's institution, in addition to two bilingual associates of the author. The interview data was analysed using NVivo 11.

As mentioned above, the data shown here is drawn from a larger study which examined dynamic changes relating to motivation from the perspective of Dörnyei's L2 motivational self system (2005). The questions in that larger study were derived from a number of studies (e.g. Ryan, 2009), which included anxiety, and sought to validate the L2 Motivational Self System. The questions used in the current study were as follows:

1. 英語を勉強するのは好きですか？
   Do you like learning English?
2. 英語の授業はいつも楽しみにしていますか？
   Do you look forward to your English classes? Why/ Why not?
3. 外国人と話したら緊張しますか？
   Do you feel nervous if you meet an English speaker?
4. 英語の授業で英語を話すとき緊張または混乱しますか？
   Do you get nervous or confused when you speak English in English class?
5. 友達や家族の前で英語を使うのは恥ずかしいですか？
   Are you embarrassed about using English in front of your family and/or friends?

In addition, students were asked to give scores out of 10 relating to an evaluation of their confidence in using English in the hypothetical situations given below. Students were then asked to comment on the nature of temporal changes to these scores.

1. 大勢の人の前でスピーチをするとき
   Making a presentation in front of a large group
2. 列に並んでいて顔見知りに会ったとき
   Talking with an acquaintance while standing in line
3. お店で店員さんと会話するとき
   Talking with a salesperson in a store
4. 何人かの知らない人と一緒にいるとき
   Talking in a small group of strangers
5. 列に並んでいて友達に会ったとき
   Talking with a friend while standing in line

Results

In this section, pertinent responses from the interview questions regarding student anxiety (shown above) are given. A citation taken from an interview in the first semester of the second year is indicated with a hyphen thus: (2-1). In addition, responses regarding questions relating to self-attributed scores pertaining to student confidence in a variety of situations (shown above), are also given where pertinent. A figure (Figure 1) displaying temporal changes to these confidence-related scores can be found at the end of the results section.

A. Tier 1: Fuuka

Throughout the four years, Fuuka expressed enjoyment in studying English. She valued the chance to communicate with her English teachers and others at university:

> From a long time ago from going abroad…I like the US and the UK etc. I'm, really happy when I can talk to my English teachers etc. (1-1),

although this was tempered by a comment in her first year regarding her confidence in using English at that time:

> I don't have confidence in communication or my English ability (1-2) (4).

Throughout the remainder of her interviews, Fuuka expressed both the enjoyment and the challenge of learning new things in English:

> every day I come across new words and interesting phrases. It's fun (2-2); While I'm studying, I continue to come across new words and phrases. I have to keep learning. It's fun (4-2).

The opportunity for increased output and input in her learning environment that she appeared to take advantage of, apparently stimulated Fuuka's confidence levels, expressed from her second year interviews:

> Before, I was shy and not used to talking to people. Since coming to university, I've spoken to many sempai, teachers and friends. I think I got confidence in communication (2-2) (7.2).

The same emotions of both fun and development and use of the resources available at the university, were expressed when Fuuka was asked about whether she looked forward to English class:

> Yes, it's a chance to talk to my friends and I feel that English becomes a part of me (1-1); I like English and with all the various materials, it's fun to study in English (2-2); Yes, because new knowledge increases in each class (4-2).

Throughout the four years, despite her apparent growing self-confidence in her English skills, Fuuka was embarrassed at the thought of speaking English in front of her family and friends. Initially, she blamed this on not being used to doing so: I haven't spoken English in front of them, and a difference she felt when speaking to her friends rather than native English speakers:

> It's easy to talk in front of native speakers, but with friends, it's a little…I feel awkward (1-1).

In her second interview, the embarrassment felt is limited to speaking in front of her family and concerns their perception of the English-speaking Fuuka:

> I wonder what they think about the English-speaking me (1-2).

In the second interview in her second year, Fuuka's sources of embarrassment widened, now coming from her perceived weaknesses in her English as perceived by Japanese:

> It's embarrassing for Japanese people to hear my English. I worry about my pronunciation (7.2).

However, before the second semester of her third year, Fuuka spent a period of time in the US, which appeared to give her a boost of confidence in using English both abroad and in Japan, which is reflected in her confidence scores at this time.

> I think I'm slowly losing my shyness. The opportunities for speaking increased and I got used to it. I can talk to people I don't know. (Were you not shy in the US?). In the US, I spoke openly to anyone. They spoke so fast, I had no time to worry about grammar (4-1) (8).

Her rather stellar confidence score she attributed to herself in 4-2 (9.4) can surely be traced to her high contemporaneous TOEIC scores of over 900 (for reference, the average score in Japan for 2020 was 531, with the maximum score 990) (IIBC, 2021).

B. Tier 2: Aoi

Overall, Aoi appeared to enjoy her English study at university due to an expressed feeling of progress throughout the four years, summed up in this comment from the second semester in her third year:

> I'm happy when I can do something I couldn't do before. I can talk to foreigners etc. It's fun to come to be able to do something (3-2).

However, this enjoyment was somewhat stymied by her evaluation of her English skills:

> There are times when I try hard. Especially in speaking class, some students around me can speak really well. I feel overwhelmed. I don't want to take a class with them. My motivation takes a hit (2-2).

A rise nevertheless in her attributed confidence scores at this time (her second year) was credited to more efforts to use English outside of the classroom:

> I have had more opportunities to talk to foreigners, I enjoy talking to them. I feel 'I can do it!' at that time and my confidence goes up. If I don't get involved, I feel like I can't talk but at the last exchange meeting, even if I didn't say what I wanted to say, it was fun ... (2-2).

The subsequent confirmation of the value in a practical use of English came during her study abroad in Canada in the first semester of her third year in Canada, giving rise to Aoi's highest confidence score of 8.6:

> I came here and everyone around me is non-Japanese, so I speak more with non-Japanese and it's an environment where I have to speak, so I think that's why it has increased (3-1).

> In Japan, I kept quiet. Here, everyone speaks up. They don't raise their hand; they just reply. I got used to that (3-1).

The confidence ebbed, however (6.4), upon her return to Japan, due to her classes which focussed on English grammar and the requirement of 'correct' answers to posed questions:

> I'd like to go back to Canada. It's an environment where I can speak up without worrying about mistakes. Everyone knows mistakes are being made but they don't criticize; they help. That was an atmosphere it was easy to (speak English) in (3-2).

Aoi's confidence level then rose again, however, to the second-highest in the study (7.2) following an increased use of English with her Japanese university friends.

In her final interview, Aoi's confidence level dropped to 5.2, lower than in her very first interview, which she attributed to a lack of English use, though she appeared positive that her future employment may be an avenue for increased use:

> I think it's because I haven't really come into contact with English. Recently, when I spoke to my host father (on social media) at first, I was slow to type. After a little conversation, I was able to type normally, but recently, even when I'm in chat, I'm not sure what to type. (Do you mean that you've lost confidence?) Probably something like that. When I start work, I will probably have more contact with foreigners. (4-2).

C. Tier 3: Eito

In his first year, still apparently full of enthusiasm for the English classes he had enjoyed in his high school, Eito enjoyed the university's communication classes:

> I'm looking forward to today's class. Without using Japanese, even if it's in broken English, I want to communicate what I'm thinking to another person. When I succeed in doing that, it's really fun (1-1).

Eito's attributed confidence scores increased until the end of his second year (5, 5.2, 5.2, 6.2), although he was uncertain of how much progress he was making from his second year, due to the lack of English conversation classes;

> Compared to the first (interview), I think I got more confident thanks to this (English conversation) lesson, but now the lessons have finished, I'm uncertain again. I thought 'I'm not sure but after that class finishes, and the chances for English speaking stop, I'll be bad at speaking again'. I think there are many areas where I've gone down this time (2-1).

Of interest was Eito's growing concern, from the beginning of his second year, with his English-speaking self. He became more self-conscious of his English use, especially in front of his family:

> It's embarrassing to show off what I've been studying hard to do. I want to hide that from my family. I've never told my family that I'm good at English (3-1).

When asked to elaborate, it appeared that rather than family pressure or expectation, a self-imposed judgement and a fear of failure in Eito's own eyes, stemming from previous successes and efforts, were being projected onto others:

> Writing is no problem, but I don't want (my family) to know I speak and can understand English. If they know how I speak, how I pronounce things, it's really embarrassing. (Is your family so strict?) No. (You don't want them to judge?) Yes. (Do you put pressure on yourself regarding English?) Yes, I think so. In my first year, when I first started these interviews, it surprised me how passionate I was regarding English. Conversely, I think that negatively affected me later (4-2).

Eito's comments in the second interview of his second year further revealed how the atmosphere that he enjoyed in his first year's communication class enabled him to have a feeling of confidence in the classroom, which also diminished in his second year:

> I don't have confidence in my spoken or written English, so it's embarrassing to speak or write in front of friends or family. In the first year, I took eikaiwa class and that was big for me. I didn't think like that then. I was forced to speak and I think I got confidence from that (2-2).

The end of English communication classes also saw a cessation of the atmosphere of competitiveness that Eito seems to have thrived on:

> I think as the years go by, my reason for learning English diminishes. In my first year, I didn't want to lose. I wanted to get better and get TOEIC etc. I don't feel like I'm in competition anymore. I've lost my motivation to study (3-1).

His comments regarding his scores in his third year, while still relatively high (5.8, 6, in the first and second semesters, respectively) indicated Eito's loss of passion for English at this time:

> To be honest with you, before, when I was in the first grade, I had a feeling that I didn't want to lose to such and such and 'let's develop what I'm good at'. I was just studying English not to lose to that guy. Now I don't have English class and there's no one to compare myself with and so I've come to think that I've had enough (3-1).

The precipitous drop in Eito's fourth year confidence scores (3.6, 3.8) emphasized this negative trajectory regarding his lack of passion for his English studies.

Despite these setbacks, Eito's expressed appreciation of English study continued until his final interview, but by this time, his lack of study either by himself or university-based, left him unable to perceive any potential avenues for furtherance in this regard:

> When I studied it, I enjoyed it (English). Now I don't, I don't know where to start. I have to start by myself. It's not like I'm asked to do something in a classroom (4-2).

Tier 1

Fuuka	1	2	3	4	5	AV
1-1	2	2	4	4	5	4
1-2	2	4	5	3	6	4
2-1	3	6	5	5	7	5.2
2-2	5	8	8	7	8	7.2
3-1	5	8	8	8	9	7.5
3-2	7	9	9	8	9	8
4-1	6	9	8	8	9	8
4-2	8	10	10	10	9	9.4

Tier 2

Aoi	1	2	3	4	5	AV
1-1	5	7	3	5	8	6
1-2	4	6	4	6	6	5
2-1	4	4	2	2	4	3.2
2-2	5	6	4	4	8	5.4
3-1	7	9	9	8	10	8.6
3-2	6	7	3	6	10	6
4-1	6	6	7	7	10	7
4-2	3	7	3	4	9	5.2

Tier 3

Eito	1	2	3	4	5	AV
1-1	7	3	5	2	7	5
1-2	6	7	4	4	5	5.2
2-1	5	4	5	5	7	5.2
2-2	8	4	7	5	7	6.2
3-1	7	5	7	4	6	5.8
3-2	8	4	6	5	7	6
4-1	3	3	5	2	5	4
4-2	4	3	4	3	5	3.8

Figure 1: Student self-attributed confidence scores over time
*Note: AV refers to an average of these scores

Discussion

The findings in this examination of the data further promote the idea of the association of motivation and anxiety. In addition, they confirm the cycle of higher perceived competence leading

to lower anxiety and higher willingness to communicate and its corollary of lower perceived competence leading to higher anxiety and less willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1997; Sampasivam & Clément, 2014; Sugawara & Sato, 2020).

The concept of a different self being exposed when using English and the simultaneous rise in anxiety generated from this fear, was shared by students from different tiers in the study. Concerns in this regard from Aoi, in Tier 2 and Eito in Tier 3, were all based around worries of how their family and/or friends, would perceive their lack of English ability. While other studies have reported student anxiety when using the L2 in what might be termed 'higher stakes' situations, such as when speaking to a proficient English speaker (MacIntyre et al., 1997), or in a language test, this study shows how students' perception of reactions to this 'other' L2 self in imagined scenarios, from family, peers or in other 'lower stakes' situations are also of significance for these learners, regardless of the *hensachi* level of their institutions,.

Anxiety also appears linked to the ability of students to visualize a future English-speaking self, independent of the curriculum content of the institution, contributing confidence, as well as meaning, to the students' L2 studies, such as with Fuuka in Tier 1 and Aoi in Tier 2. These findings support previous research which has also demonstrated this relationship (Papi & Khajavy, 2021; Sugawara & Sato, 2020). A previous study (Cooke, 2021a), which examined the role of the ideal L2 self, also highlighted the potential of existence of this trait for promoting L2 motivation.

Finally, regarding the learning environment, while much of the cited research has forwarded the influence of the teacher as germane in facilitating student enjoyment in the language classroom, none of the students in this study specifically mention their teachers in this regard. Instead, episodes of both positive (Eito, Tier 3) and negative (Aoi, Tier 2) influences regarding the language classroom's atmosphere are perceived through student-student interactions. While teacher involvement can be assumed in the construction of these opportunities for interaction, the importance and strength of students' own autonomous efforts to engage in these activities can also be suggested. Reference is also made in comments featured in this study to the learning environment and opportunities therein for exploring the L2. For students without such a rich environment, autonomous steps taken to explore opportunities for language engagement in their free time (in the form of trips abroad etc., cited by Fuuka and Aoi) appear to provide impetus that might act as triggers for further efforts in this regard.

Conclusion

Mentimeter This study sought to examine temporal changes in student anxiety and confidence regarding English studies through bi-annual interviews carried out over four years. While the study did not examine student perceived, or actual, concurrent levels of English, due to a lack of shared undertaken English tests, which might expose explicit relationships of ability and anxiety, an examination of the students' perceptions of English reveals a number of interesting patterns in the data relating to this variable.

Regarding students' feelings towards English, the study uncovered the positive and negative influences of both cumulative events, in the form of sustained vision over time regarding their predicted future use of English, and trigger events, in the form of travel abroad and the cessation or reduction of institution-based prescriptive instruction. As indicated by the students' stated reactions to their changing relationship with English, rather than the academic levels associated with each institution and even, in some cases, the opportunities for interactions with English therein, it is the idiosyncratic behaviours and mindset of the individuals in this study and observed similarities in this regard that best offer hints to patterns that may be established and utilised to suggest positive/negative learning outcomes. The study thus highlights the varied and dynamic nature of anxiety and confidence. It also affirms the benefits of the examination of narrative enquiry and longitudinal studies to uncover authentic student stories, dreams and concerns.

Forming part of a larger examination of motivational changes relating to English learning, the questions posed in this study were not specifically targeted towards uncovering changes in anxiety as more rigorous examinations of this emotion have done, such as those employing the FLCA or its corollary, the FLE (foreign language enjoyment scale). Future studies will seek to employ a more complex design, combining a longitudinal study in combination with these scales, with the aim of producing qualitative and quantitative data for more thorough analyses.

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