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Examining First-Year Japanese University Students' Anxiety in the English Communication Classroom – An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

Several studies regarding English education in Japan highlight the challenges of transitioning from high school to university English classes, where students must adopt more active learning roles, often increasing classroom anxiety. Research has also examined how teaching methodologies can alleviate this anxiety. Building on studies of foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) and foreign language enjoyment (FLE), this article presents initial findings from an exploratory study on the effects of student-centred classrooms in reducing anxiety and enhancing enjoyment. The study involved 372 first-year students in 15-week elective English communication courses at two northeastern Japanese universities. A Pearson bivariate correlation conducted early in the courses examined the relationship between self-perceived English ability and both classroom anxiety and enjoyment. Results showed that higher-perceived English ability correlated with lower anxiety and greater enjoyment ($r = -.307$), while lower-perceived English ability was linked to higher anxiety and reduced enjoyment ($r = .152$). Student remarks collected after several weeks of student-centred instruction highlighted the appeal of this approach for both groups. Comments focused on classroom and teacher behaviours that effectively reduced anxiety and promoted enjoyment, indicating that a student-centred classroom methodology benefited students regardless of their perceived English ability or anxiety levels.

Keywords: Japan, Foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), Foreign language enjoyment (FLE)

Introduction

In his overview of the development of anxiety research, MacIntyre states: “It is safe to say that language anxiety has been the most widely studied emotion in SLA” (2017, p. 11). Indeed, studies from a number of international contexts have verified the important role that anxiety

plays in language learning. Since its initial definition, foreign language anxiety, “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p. 128), has been linked to a number of language learning variables affecting academic progress and outcomes of the language learner.

Since the ground-breaking study of Horwitz et al. (1986), which employed a 5-point 33-item Likert scale, FLCA has been better defined as a specific construct of anxiety linked to foreign language acquisition. More recent studies have further examined the debilitating effects of anxiety, such as tension and worry. MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012a) argue that students may even experience a rudimentary ‘fight or flight’ response in language-learning situations. They describe how students can feel overwhelmed when they struggle to understand those around them, leading to a fundamental question: “How can we fit into and avoid being rejected by this group?” (2012a, p. 195). The result of such a response implies a potential withdrawal from interaction, creating a lack of potential input and output and thus physical and intellectual modes of communication, none of which bode well for a constructive English communication classroom!

The Role of Positive Emotion in Language Learning

Following MacIntyre & Gregersen’s (2012b) study, which proposed the benefits to foreign language acquisition through positive emotion, and the creation of a learning environment which supports and fosters language exposure and practice, Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014) developed a Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) scale to elicit student responses to 21 items relating to positive emotions relating to the language learning experience. The study’s concept was influenced by the prevailing interest in the role of positive psychology in learning, in that the role of positive emotions in suppressing negative feelings and helping to “facilitate exploration and play, leading to the opportunity to have new experiences and learn in an efficient way” (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, p. 241). The scale also included 8 items taken from the original study by Horwitz et al. (1986). The results, from an overall well-educated and self-selected sample of students from all age groups from 90 different countries, showed how a number of variables, including education level and students’ perception of their L2 proficiency, relate to these emotions. The results also indicated the potential for interaction of the two emotions, with “enjoyment encouraging playful exploration and anxiety generating focus on the need to take specific action from time to time” (2014, p. 262).

Analysis of an open-ended question included in the survey regarding enjoyable episodes experienced by participants included activities featuring active student involvement and the importance of the teacher’s attitude in creating and fostering a positive environment through both comments during the class and the creation of student-centred activities. A later study by Dewaele, Witney, Saito and Dewaele (2017), similarly indicated the influence of the teacher, students’ attitudes toward the FL, and time given to speaking in the FL. Startling in these results was the influence of the teacher mentioned in student responses regarding FLE, rather than in the responses to FLCA, further highlighting the role of the teacher in establishing a positive learning environment.

L2 Education and Learning in the Japanese Context

A number of studies regarding L2 education and learning have been located in the Japanese context. It is a context which offers a somewhat unique L2 environment for a number of reasons. These include the paucity of opportunities for learners to practice L2 in everyday society, and the continued focus on rote-based learning required for academic progression. Challenges for L2 teachers and students alike regarding this latter point have been detailed by Bartlett (2017), McVeigh (2014), and more recently by Yamanaka and Suzuki (2020). Yamanaka and Suzuki (2020) examined the ongoing schism between the policies of the Japanese education ministry and its call for greater English communicative competence, and the evaluation methods and criteria for entrance into higher education after high school, which continue to favour multiple choice and translation tasks without a spoken component.

Challenges in Transitioning from Secondary to Tertiary Education

Cacali and Germinario (2018), drawing on Liu & Fisher's (2010) western/Chinese comparison, contrast Japan's rote-based learning structure with a more Socratic pattern found in many western institutions. They then highlight the "dramatic discontinuity between secondary and tertiary settings" (2018, p.172), in which students are suddenly required to express their own and question others' beliefs through the sharing of opinions with teachers and newly-formed peer groups, what Lin & Fisher term a "one community, 2 systems" context (Cacali and Germinario, 2018, p.171). Indeed, for most institutions, the tertiary English communication classroom is the only classroom subject which encourages and demands student change in this way. For FL researchers and teachers, concerned with language classroom anxiety in the Japanese context, it is this aspect which holds a great deal of interest, due to the expectations placed on students regarding the nature of their required participation in tertiary communicative language classes.

Broader Studies into L2 Motivation

Much of the research which concerns anxiety in the Japanese L2 classroom has been part of a broader study into L2 motivation in this context. This is to be expected, for as Noels states: "Motivational orientations are important predictors of language learning engagement" (Noels, 2013, p.18), with anxiety uncovered in such studies as being one of these elements. In a 2010 study of student motivation among first-year students enrolled in a general English course at a Japanese university, Nitta & Asano reported that "initial motivational states...might affect the trajectories of motivational changes in the classroom" and that "a number of social and interpersonal factors, such as teaching styles, intergroup relations and group cohesiveness, have significant impact on students' learning in the classroom" (Nitta & Asano, 2010, p.194). These findings were echoed in Koga's 2010 longitudinal study, which investigated changing motivation, anxiety and cooperativeness over one semester and featured 93 first-year Japanese university students of assumed intermediate levels. Results suggested that when motivation among students was stimulated, anxiety was reduced. Koga also stressed the importance of cooperative tasks to foster classroom group cohesion and, in turn, motivation. The role of the teacher in the learning context was also made evident in Johnson's (2013) longitudinal study of EFL learning motivation among first-year Japanese engineering students, reflecting the findings of Falout, Elwood & Hood (2009), in the latter's examination of demotivating factors among 900 Japanese students from all year groups.

Research Aims

Building on previous research on FLCA and FLE, this study focused on first-year Japanese university students. Specifically, it examined how student-centred instructional approaches might support their transition to English conversation classes at the tertiary level. The study aimed to:

- **Examine the Relationship Between Self-Perceived English Ability and FLCA/FLE:** Investigate how students' self-assessed English proficiency correlates with their anxiety and enjoyment in the classroom.
- **Understand Student Perceptions:** Collect and analyze students' perceptions and specific comments about their experiences in student-centred English communication classes.
- **Identify Effective Teaching Practices:** Identify classroom and teacher behaviours that effectively reduce anxiety and enhance enjoyment, thereby facilitating a positive transition to tertiary English conversation classrooms.
- **Compare Responses Between Different Proficiency Levels:** Analyze and compare the differences in responses and experiences between students with higher and lower self-perceived English abilities.
- **Foster a Positive Learning Environment:** Draw conclusions on how to create a learning environment that mitigates anxiety and fosters enjoyment, encouraging active participation and better language learning outcomes.

This led to the central research question:

What factors are effective in facilitating transition to the Japanese tertiary English conversation classroom?

Methodology

Participants

The participants in the study were 372 first-year students enrolled in elective English communication classes from two Japanese universities in NE Japan. Although the classes were taught by two different teachers, one from each institution, the class content, including the textbook used, was largely the same. The teachers also shared a teaching style which favoured high levels of student participation through active learning, and a focus on meaning rather than strictly correct form. Specifically, the classes feature activities that necessitated group collaboration, such as through recreation of a text using dictogloss, and group and individual reflection on performance in spoken activities.

Procedure

To assess current English proficiency levels in the third week of a 15-week course, students first completed a self-assessed proficiency test derived from the CEFR-J (Tono & Negishi, 2012). The questions were presented in an online form for students to answer during class time. The CEFR-J is a localized adaptation of the Common European Framework of Reference for

Languages (CEFR), designed specifically for the English language context in Japan. It features "can-do" descriptors that represent learners' self-assessed abilities in the language. Based on the "action-oriented approach" of the original CEFR, the CEFR-J expands the standard six levels (A1–C2) into 12 finer distinctions (see Markel, 2018, for further details). The inclusion of self-perceived scores of one's English ability sought to further validate self-reported scores from the FLCA and FLE questionnaire. It was judged that the targets set out in the CEFR-J correspond more closely to the goals set out by the Japanese Ministry of Education than tests cited in other research used to evaluate these scores. The 372 students were divided into two groups, higher-level and lower-level, based on their scores on the CEFR-J. This resulted in 206 students in the higher-level group and 166 students in the lower-level group. According to Markel's classification, analysis revealed that the lower-level students fell under the "Basic user" category, while the higher-level students were classified as "Independent users" (see Table 1).

Table 1. Average CEFR-J scores

Group	Speaking (interaction)	Speaking (production)	Understanding (listening)	Understanding (reading)	Writing
Upper level	B1.1	B1.1	A2.2	A2.2	A2.2
Lower level	A1.3	A1.3	A1.3	A1.2	A1.3

During the same class, students were asked to answer questions consisting of the original 33-item questionnaire developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) and also the 21-point FLE questionnaire developed by Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014). The 5-point Likert scale for both was retained. The questions were translated into Japanese by the author. Japanese accuracy was verified by proficient Japanese speakers at the author's institution. A Pearson bivariate correlation was then carried out in SPSS 27 to examine the relationship between self-perceived CEFR-J scores and variables relating to classroom anxiety (i.e., responses to questions regarding the FLCA), and CEFR-J scores and variables relating to classroom enjoyment (i.e., responses to questions regarding the FLE).

In addition to questions regarding the FLCA and the FLE, the questionnaire also featured the following questions:

1. Do you think your feelings about English have changed since joining this class? Why do you think so?
2. Has there been a particular event in the class or in your life that has affected your feelings towards English?

The questions were posed in Japanese for ease of understanding. Of the 372 participants, 363 offered responses. The questions were answered and completed by 197 of the 206 students from the upper level, and all 166 members of the lower-level students. Drawing on responses in previous research, it was expected that lower-level students would identify activities which encouraged them to take active participation in the class as inducing anxiety and thus refer to them in a negative light. Conversely, it was expected that the higher-level students would identify those activities in a positive light. The comments were coded and analyzed for content, with grouping based on frequency and emerging themes.

Results

As expected and as suggested in other research, the results demonstrated a negative correlation between ability and anxiety, i.e. higher ability = lower anxiety ($r = -.307$, $p < .001$) (Table 2). There was a positive, albeit weaker, correlation between ability and enjoyment, i.e. higher ability = higher enjoyment ($r = .152$, $p = .003$) (Table 3).

Table 2. Negative correlation between ability and anxiety

		CEFR-J	FLCA
CEFR-J	Pearson Correlation	1	-.307**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.01
	N	372	372
FLCA	Pearson Correlation	.307**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	372	372

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3. Positive correlation between ability and enjoyment

		CEFR-J	FLE
CEFR-J	Pearson Correlation	1	.152**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.03
	N	372	372
FLE	Pearson Correlation	.152**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.03	
	N	372	372

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Comments relating to positive perception of the classroom were most prevalent, accounting for 70% of upper-level responses and 61% of lower-level responses. Comments relating to the four following themes were most prevalent: Not having to worry about grammar mistakes; Class methodology; Inspiration from the atmosphere of the classroom; English study becoming fun (Table 4).

Table 4. Positively-perceived class-related factors

	Upper level responses	Lower level responses
Listening activities	1 (0.5%)	/
Not having to worry about grammar mistakes	19 (9.6%)	28 (16.9%)
Class methodology	37 (18.8%)	16 (9.6%)
Inspiration from the atmosphere of the classroom	59 (30%)	43 (25.9%)
Feeling of improvement in English	3 (1.5%)	/
English study became fun	16 (8.1%)	13 (7.8%)
Change from negative to positive view of English study	3	2 (1.2%)
Total	138 (70.1%)	102 (61.5%)

The following sample comments relating to these four components have been translated into English by the author where necessary.

Sample comment from upper-level student regarding not having to worry about grammar mistakes:

変わったと思う。正確な英語でなくても伝わるから。先生が簡単な単語でもいいから会話してみようと言われて勇気が出た。

I think I've changed. Even if I don't use perfect English, I can still get my message across. The teacher encouraged us to try speaking with simple words, which gave me the courage to do so.

Sample comment from lower-level students:

スピーキングがとても楽しいものになりました。文法が少し間違っていたり、言いたいことが英語で思いつかなく、ちょっと婉曲的な表現をしても、友達とかが頷いてくれたりするので、間違いを気にせずに楽しく会話することができるからです。

Speaking has become a lot of fun for me. Even if my grammar is a bit off or I can't find the right words in English and have to use more indirect expressions, my friends nod along and encourage me. This makes it easy to enjoy conversations without worrying about making mistakes.

Sample comment from upper-level students regarding class methodology:

At first, I was afraid that I speak my thoughts. However, this class's atmosphere is kind. So, I want to learn more about English.

Sample comments from lower-level students:

グループワークをやっているうちに少しずつ
英語で話すことへの抵抗が減っていった

While doing group work, my resistance to speaking in English gradually decreased.

Sample comment from upper-level students regarding inspiration from the atmosphere of the classroom:

英語は嫌いで全く勉強する気が今まで起きなかったですが、この授業は楽しいので少し頑張ってみようという気持ちになりました。

I used to dislike English and had no motivation to study it, but this class is fun, so I feel inspired to put in a little effort!

Sample comment from lower-level students:

英語に対する気持ちはより強くなった気がする。英語のクラス自体が自分の気持ちに影響を与えていると思う。国際化が進むなかで英語を話せると言うのはすごく良い利点なので、積極性を持って話していきたい。

I feel that my passion for English has grown stronger. I think the English class itself is influencing my feelings. In an increasingly globalized world, being able to speak English is a significant advantage, so I want to approach speaking with enthusiasm.

Sample comment from upper-level students regarding English study becoming fun:

英語は嫌いで全く勉強する気が今まで起きなかったですが、この授業は楽しいので少し頑張ってみようという気持ちになりました。

I used to dislike English and was not motivated to study it, but this class is fun, so I feel inspired to put in a little effort!

Sample comment from lower-level students:

英語に対するイメージはそこまで変わっていないが、授業で先生がよくフレンドリーに話しかけてくれるおかげで英語で話せることへの楽しさは以前より増したと思う。

My overall image of English hasn't changed much, but I think the enjoyment of speaking English has increased because our teacher often engages with us in a friendly manner during class.

The next most common responses were regarding perceived changes in attitude toward English since entering university. Most prevalent in this category were comments that did not directly address any perceived changes (Table 5).

Table 5. Perceived changes in attitude toward English since entering university

	Upper level responses	Lower level responses
I liked English before coming to university	9 (4.6%)	/
No change (no indication of positive/negative changes)	33 (16.8%)	46 (27.7%)
Total	42 (21.3%)	46 (27.7%)

Discussion

By analysing students' self-perceptions of their English abilities and their anonymously submitted comments, the research explored factors influencing anxiety and enjoyment in the classroom, in a bid to uncover key elements that were effective in facilitating transition to the Japanese tertiary English conversation classroom.

Hypothesis and Results

Prior to the study, it was surmised that lower-level students would negatively perceive activities that require active participation due to high anxiety, while higher-level students would view them in a positive light. However, the results indicate that regardless of perceived levels of English skill and anxiety, students recognized the (initial) goals of the communicative English classroom and the value in their active contributions for the benefit of their own language competence and development. This was revealed through collected comments revealing themes of class methodology and atmosphere, and English study becoming fun. As has been established in previous research on classroom dynamics, this attitude is essential in helping to create a cohesive group in which "members feel a moral responsibility to contribute to a group's success, and the group's goal-oriented norms have a strong influence on the individual" (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p.65). The results also indicate that regardless of perceived levels of English skill and anxiety, students appear to be inspired by the atmosphere in the classroom fostered through the positive energy of fellow students and the teacher, and confirm earlier findings regarding the importance of student experiences in the initial stages of second language courses.

Conclusion

Understanding Classroom Anxiety in Context

The extensive history of research into student anxiety in second-language classrooms underscores the importance of exploring ways to reduce anxiety and foster a productive, functional learning environment. In the Japanese context, the transition from secondary to tertiary English education can be a flashpoint for increased classroom anxiety, as it requires learners to use English in ways that may conflict with common communication norms in their native language or society. Given the diverse learning contexts and the varied perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviours influencing language acquisition, a one-size-fits-all teaching

model is impractical. Instead, research, such as this study, emphasises the value of classroom evaluation in assessing what is effective and what is not within the local context.

Pedagogical Implications and Strategies

Findings from this research suggest that student-centred classrooms grounded in communicative purpose are effective in reducing student anxiety. In particular, strategies that foster a supportive classroom climate, prioritize communicative intent over linguistic perfection, and encourage engagement in speaking tasks were observed to have a positive impact. For example, promoting communication over accuracy helped to reframe errors as part of the learning process rather than signs of failure. Structuring lessons around collaborative tasks, such as group-based dictogloss activities or peer reflection discussions, not only appeared to reduce the affective burden of speaking but also built a sense of shared effort. Positive teacher engagement further contributed to an atmosphere where learners felt seen and supported.

Limitations of the Current Study

While the results highlight initial successes in creating an environment where students embrace the atmosphere of the first-year communicative English classroom in Japanese tertiary education, some weaknesses remain to be addressed in future research. Since 2010, the dynamic approach employed in various realms in SLA, including anxiety, has encouraged the examination of fluctuations in anxiety over periods of time, and the consequential dynamic interactions between individual and context, rather than student reactions captured in 'snapshots', such as in this and other research. In this regard, for example, as the data for this study was captured at an early stage of the course, students might have been keener to engage with a new methodology in their new learning context, rendering a positive skew on reported data.

Directions for Future Research

The dynamic approach allows for the inclusion of both more and less predictable influences on the learner, such as changes of teacher or peer group. Indeed, my own research has shown the importance of longitudinal studies to demonstrate a more meaningful interpretation of student emotions regarding their learning (Cooke, 2022). As Ushioda states, "within the context of institutionalized learning especially, the common experience would seem to be emotional flux rather than stability" (Ushioda 1996, p. 240). More specifically, Dörnyei & Ryan (2015), in their comments regarding the future of anxiety research, have spoken of the need for it to "foreground a more dynamic concept of anxiety, highlighting aspects of change as well as types of adaptations that can lead to the behavioural outcomes of anxiety both in positive and the negative direction" (Dörnyei & Ryan 2015, p.180). With these considerations in mind, future studies will seek to follow first-year student anxiety/enjoyment trajectories over the period of one university semester, thereby rendering an account of fluctuations of anxiety and enjoyment in the English classroom that will seek to better demonstrate the long-term effects of activities that seek to temper student anxiety and promote enjoyment in the English communicative classroom.

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