

# A Look at Language Anxiety and How it Affects Japanese EFL Learners When Performing Oral Tasks

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journal or publication title	The Journal of Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies
number	5
page range	61-72
year	2003-06-30
URL	<a href="http://id.nii.ac.jp/1165/00000289/">http://id.nii.ac.jp/1165/00000289/</a>



# A Look at Language Anxiety and How it Affects Japanese EFL Learners When Performing Oral Tasks

—言語不安、及び、外国語を話す際に言語不安がどう日本人EFL学習者に影響を与えるか—

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## Abstract

This article looks at language anxiety as it affects Japanese EFL learners when performing oral tasks. A review of the literature illustrates the perspectives from which foreign language anxiety research has been conducted. The reasons Japanese EFL learners experience language anxiety when performing oral tasks are explored. Some of the potential causes of Japanese EFL learners' language anxiety have been identified as communication apprehension, social evaluation, and interlearner competition. This article provides several suggestions designed to assist EFL teachers in Japan in dealing with their learners' language anxiety. Foreign EFL teachers in Japan are encouraged to learn as much as possible about Japanese society and culture, so as to better understand how these factors may influence their learners when speaking a foreign language. It is also suggested that EFL teachers in Japan strive towards making their classrooms more intimate (less formal), moving away from the evaluation paradigm, which seems deeply ingrained in the values of Japanese society.

本稿は、日本人EFL学習者が外国語を話す際に影響を及ぼす言語不安について考察する。これまでに行われた外国語不安に関する調査により様々な見解があることが分かる。日本人EFL学習者が外国語を話す時に体験する言語不安について検討する。可能性として挙げられてきたものに、コミュニケーション上の不安、社会評価、学習者間の競争意識などがある。本稿では日本におけるEFL教師が学習者の言語不安にどう対処すれば良いか、いくつか提案する。日本でのEFL教師はできる限り日本の社会や文化、またそれらが外国語を話す際に学習者にどう影響してくるかを学ぶべきだ。EFL教師はレッスンをより親しみやすいものにし、なおかつ日本社会の価値観に根付いているように思われる評価パラダイムをとらない方が良い。

## Introduction

A topic of increasing research attention in the study of language learning is the role of language anxiety. In my experience teaching oral EFL classes in Japan, my learners often experience a great deal of anxiety when performing oral tasks. In this paper, I will attempt to address this issue in an effort to inform language pedagogy in contexts similar to mine.

I will begin, in part one, by presenting research that has been conducted in this area, and

explaining how it assists in the greater understanding of SLA. In the second part of this paper, I will discuss how *language anxiety* affects the Japanese learner's ability to perform oral tasks, and examine some of the reasons that may contribute to it. Lastly, in part three, I will show how the general research into *language anxiety* (provided in part one), along with the unique circumstances pertinent to the Japanese learner (provided in part two) can provide useful information for teachers who can subsequently make adjustments to improve their teaching methods and practices where language anxiety is concerned.

### **Part 1: How Does the Study of "Language Anxiety" Contribute to the Greater Understanding of SLA Processes?**

The study of *language anxiety* contributes to our understanding of SLA processes in many ways. From the research (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, etc.), *language anxiety* can now be defined more specifically than ever before. Accordingly, we can determine what influence it has on learners, and find out what causes it to occur. The answers to these questions can go a long way in helping teachers devise their classroom methods and practices, as I will discuss in detail in part three.

#### **What is Language Anxiety?**

Various studies comparing students' levels of anxiety in their foreign language class to their other classes (e.g. math, history, etc.) indicated that students experience considerably more anxiety in their foreign language classes (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; and Muchnik & Wolfe, 1982). The concept of "foreign language anxiety" is still in its infancy, thus second language research has not yet adequately defined it in precise terms (Horwitz et al., 1986). Further, there are many varying degrees of intensity, which seemingly make it difficult to apply boundaries towards a set definition (Doyon, 2000; and MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Some generalizations can, however, be made. Gardner & MacIntyre (1993) define language anxiety as 'the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient' (p.5). Some of the symptoms include nervousness, tension, apprehension, and introversion.

#### **What Effect does Anxiety have on Learning?**

Much of the early research (Chastain, 1975; Kleinman, 1977; and Scovel, 1978) devoted to anxiety and language learning was difficult to interpret because of the contradictory results. Part of the reason for this has been attributed to the *general* measurement techniques taken by the earlier researchers. Some of the early research suggests that a certain amount of anxiety can actually help learners' performance in the classroom (Scovel, 1978). For example, Kleinmann (1977) reports positive correlations between *facilitating* anxiety and the use of

more difficult linguistic structures.

However, as Gardner & MacIntyre (1993) have suggested, this may have more to do with the *general* measures taken in the studies. Most recent studies, using a more *specific* approach to measurement, support the widespread view that anxiety generally has a debilitating effect on L2 performance (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Gardner, Smythe, Clement, & Glikzman, 1976; and Horwitz et al., 1986)

Some studies have shown that anxiety influences communication strategies learners employ in a language class. For instance, Ely (1986) reports that anxious learners were less likely to take risks in the language class. Similarly, Steinberg & Horwitz (1986) found that anxious learners produced less interpretive and more concrete messages than relaxed learners. The results found in these studies are consistent with research on other types of specific communication anxiety, which states that anxious learners generally speak, write, and participate less in the language classroom than relaxed students (Spolsky, 1989).

### What Causes Language Anxiety?

Horwitz et al. (1986) theorize that *foreign language anxiety* in the classroom can be attributed to three performance anxieties: *communication apprehension*, *social evaluation*, and *test anxiety*. First, *communication apprehension* may be defined as the fear over the real or anticipated act of speaking. It is this type of anxiety that I find most prevalent in my EFL conversation classes in Japan. Second, *social evaluation* may be defined as the worry over how one's actions will be perceived by others in the social setting. It is this type of anxiety that Zimbardo (1977) reports to be predominant in Japanese society. Lastly, *test anxiety* may be defined as the fear of failure, especially when skills are being measured formally as in exams.

This theory is largely based on clinical experience and anecdotal evidence, however it has received large support in terms of research activity and validating evidence is accumulating. The components receiving the strongest support seem to be *communication apprehension and social evaluation*, while the importance of *test anxiety* remains inconclusive (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Some other studies have also helped us in understanding the causes of *language anxiety*. For instance, Bailey's study (1983) in which he analyzed learners' diaries found that interlearner competition can act as a source of anxiety. In addition, some researchers have claimed that students may suffer *language anxiety* due to cultural inhibitions. Oxford (1992) likens this to the concept known as *culture shock*. Learners may fear the experience of losing their identities in the target culture (Ellis 1994). This concept is further developed in Clement's model (1980), which is discussed below.

### Causal Models

Another reason, which has been suggested for the mixed results in early studies, is that

the relationship between *anxiety* and *achievement* is probably not a linear one. Many other factors such as motivation, personality, experience, and self-confidence may also play a role. Some researchers have developed models to account for some of these factors.

### **MacIntyre and Gardner's Model**

MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) propose a model in which the relationship between anxiety and learning is moderated by the learners' stage of development and their learning experiences. In this model, *language anxiety* is seen as a learned emotional response. *Language anxiety* develops as the result of repeated negative experiences with the L2, whereas, positive experiences are thought to erode the negative effects of *language anxiety*. *Language anxiety* would be expected to decrease as proficiency increases. This assertion is consistent with my own observations in the classroom and has been supported by a great amount of research (Chapelle & Roberts, 1986; Desrochers & Gardner, 1981; Gardner, Smythe, & Brunet, 1977; and Gardner, Smythe, & Clement, 1979).

### **Clement's Model**

Another model receiving empirical support is that proposed by Clement (Clement, 1986; Clement, Gardner, & Smythe, 1977; Clement & Kruidenier, 1985; Clement, Major, Gardner, & Smythe, 1977; Labrie & Clement, 1986). Clement's model does not account for language anxiety as an independent factor, but rather as a subordinate construct of *self-confidence*. Clement (1980, 1986) considers *self-confidence* to encompass both a *lack of anxiety and positive self-ratings*.

Clement's model describes two motivational processes present in multicultural settings. The primary motivation is determined by the interplay between learners' desire to affiliate with the target language community, and their fear of losing their own cultural identity. Clement (1980) asserts that the effect of this process will determine the amount of contact with the other group. The secondary motivation is based on the frequency and quality of interaction with the other group. If this contact is positive, students can improve their *self-confidence*, and increase their motivation to learn the target language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Thus, MacIntyre & Gardner (1989) and Clement's (1980) models and the research supporting them have provided us with a greater understanding about language anxiety. They have shown *language anxiety* to be associated with experiences in the L2, and they have shown that the relationship between *language anxiety* and *achievement* is probably not a linear one, consisting of other possible factors such as *motivation*, *self-confidence*, and *personality*.

## **Part 2: Language Anxiety and the Japanese Learner**

In this section of this paper, I will examine *language anxiety* as it pertains specifically to

the Japanese EFL learner's ability to perform oral tasks. First, I will look at some of the characteristics of *language anxiety* that relate to the Japanese learner, and subsequently, I will discuss some of the causes that may contribute to it.

### **Reticence**

One of the greatest phenomena that has been discussed in observing the Japanese learner is their disposition towards reticent behavior (Anderson, 1993; Ellis, 1991; Greer, 2000; and Townsend & Danling, 1998). Helgesen (1993) reports that his learners (in Japanese Universities) rarely initiated conversation, avoided bringing up new topics, did not challenge the teacher, seldom asked for clarification, and did not volunteer answers. Townsend & Danling (1998) among others, attribute this type of behavior to the anxiety Japanese learners experience when using the L2.

The type of behavior Helgesen (1993) describes is consistent with my earlier observations of my own learners. However, I have since discovered that this may have had more to do with my learners' social and cultural codes for speaking. As Anderson (1993) points out, Japanese people do talk, and sometimes they talk a lot, but the contexts in which they speak is culturally sanctioned, and does not correspond to the cultural codes of the West. Thus, EFL teachers expecting their Japanese learners to bring up new topics and volunteer answers may be disappointed. Quite simply, Japanese learners seem reluctant to talk in settings where they will stand out in front of their peers (Anderson, 1993).

### **Potential Causes**

#### **A. Inexperience and Cultural Inhibitions in Dealing with Western Teaching Methods**

Japanese learners are likely to experience *language anxiety* in oral EFL classes because they are simply not prepared to deal with the social components of Western style teaching practices where a great emphasis is put on individualism, challenging the teacher, and original opinions. In contrast, according to Nozaki (1993), Japanese think of quietness, obedience, and passivity as good traits for a learner to possess. Traditionally, the method of teaching in Japan is teacher-fronted, and unlike western classrooms, little (if any) input is solicited from the student.

#### **B. Interactional Domains**

Some of the *anxiety* occurring in language classrooms in Japan can be attributed to the stigmatization of the conventional classroom as a *ritualistic* domain. Most of a Japanese person's educational interactions will occur in what Lebra (1976) terms the *ritual* domain. This domain is characterized by conventional rules, formalities, and highly guarded behavior. Doyon (2000) among others attest that reticence is a natural form of defensive behavior

in this domain.

### C. Teacher's Demeanor and Attitude

Teachers showing a negative or disappointed reaction to the learners' behavior can also cause *language anxiety*. Evidence has shown that the teacher's demeanor and attitude may be one of the greatest factors in shaping Japanese learners' attitudes (Long, 1997; Hadley and Hadley, 1996; Shimizu, 1995).

My own classroom research supports this assertion (Cutrone, 2001). In a survey in which I asked some of my learners "What is a good English Teacher?" their responses indicated overwhelmingly that personality and demeanor/attitude were the most important factors (94 of 144 statements in the survey cited personality and/or positive demeanor/attitude as the most desired traits in an English teacher).

### D. Shyness: A Positive Quality?

There is evidence to suggest that Japanese people are shyer and more sensitive by nature than other cultures (Zimbardo, 1977). While shyness may impede learners chances of success in an oral EFL class, it is often considered an admirable trait in Japanese society (Townsend & Danling, 1998). My own classroom research supports this claim, at least partially.

In an informal survey, I asked fifteen students the following questions: "Are you shy?" and "Do you think shyness is a positive or negative quality?". All fifteen students responded that they were shy, however only five students viewed shyness as a positive quality. Of the remaining eleven students, four students believed shyness to be a negative quality, and six students were undecided.

When I asked six of my colleagues (from western countries) the same questions, three of them replied that they were shy, while the other three replied that they were not shy, but all of them view shyness as a liability. Although I realize that "shyness" is a difficult trait to measure because there exist varying degrees, I included this survey to show that Japanese peoples' attitudes towards "shyness" may differ to that of people from Western countries.

### E. Evaluation Paradigm

Another cause of *language anxiety* in Japan is learners' concern about the evaluation of them by others. The Japanese school system, consistent with the values ingrained in Japanese society, puts a great emphasis on the *evaluation paradigm*. Nozaki (1993) describes the intense pressure and competition Japanese learners experience in their childhoods as their lives typically revolve around countless examinations that determine their futures. Some of my learners have cited their fear of making mistakes as the greatest

cause of their anxiety in the language classroom. This may help explain Japanese learners' reluctance to speak and their sometimes-defensive reactions to *error correction* (Doyon, 2000).

### Part 3: Pedagogical Implications

In a brief analysis of the research and ideas presented in this paper, we can make some generalizations related to teaching EFL in Japan. First and foremost, we can assume that *language anxiety* has a debilitating effect on learners' success in the L2, and that teachers should make an effort to alleviate it in their classrooms. Second, we can speculate that learners' anxiety may be heightened by some of the cultural misunderstandings that exist between Japan and the West.

Finally, in efforts to aid in its prevention, we can begin to identify some of the potential causes of *language anxiety* such as *communication apprehension*, *social evaluation*, and *interlearner competition*. In the section that follows, I will discuss how the insights presented in this paper can be applied to aid EFL learners in Japan in performing oral tasks.

#### Acceptance and Attitude

The idea of teachers' *acceptance* towards the cultural differences that exist in ELT is central to any serious discussion about attempting to reduce *language anxiety* in the classroom. While this principle may seem fundamental, it has been, in my experience, a difficult concept for some teachers to embrace. That is, teachers may have ethnocentric ideas about what rudeness is, and how students should behave in the classroom. In my opinion, teachers should always consider the possibility that learners' behavior such as apparent aloofness, avoidance, and introversion may be due to *anxiety*. Teachers' negative reactions to this type of behavior will most likely only serve to exacerbate the learners' anxiety.

#### Learning the Cultural Codes

In efforts to encourage speaking in oral EFL classes in Japan, teachers would be well served in learning what situations their learners are inclined to speak in and why, and how these situations are different from those in the West. As I mentioned earlier, Japanese learners are reluctant to talk in situations where they will stand out in front of their peers. The notion that language learning can only take place with aggressive students volunteering individually is merely a reflection of western ethnocentrism.

Nevertheless, many students will expect their English classes taught by foreigners to be different, and some will, in fact, welcome the new experience. However, as Anderson (1993) suggests, too different too soon may alienate students. A better approach seems to be a combination of techniques that draw on the dynamics of the Japanese classroom with strategies that promote a western style of interaction. Group work activities have proven to be



especially effective in getting my students to speak more (see Cutrone, 2002).

In addition, EFL teachers in Japan should be careful not to show annoyance when learners are reluctant to speak, as this will only exacerbate the problem by adding to the learners' apprehension. In Japan, as there is evidence that Japanese people may be quieter than other cultures by nature (Zimbardo, 1977), there is always the danger of Western EFL teachers pressuring their students to be more outspoken. In my opinion, teachers would be well served in extending their own tolerance of silence when interacting with learners as this may encourage learners to speak more.

### **Moving Towards Intimacy**

In further efforts to make the learning environment less stressful, teachers would be well served in attempting to get away from the *ritual* domain commonly found in conventional classrooms in Japan, and attempt to move towards a more *intimate* domain commonly associated with family, friends, and co-workers. In calling for this approach, Williams (1994) asserts that in *intimate* situations, Japanese people appear more relaxed because they are released from cultural and institutional restraints; and thus in *intimate* classrooms, learners are free to explore the target language, and feel more comfortable speaking in front of others.

One of the ways teachers can create intimacy between students is to choose topics relating to learners' personal experiences and backgrounds, and have learners share this information in group activities. Williams (1994) reasons that the more students know about each other and have in common, the more comfortable they are likely to be.

Similarly, teachers showing a personal interest in their students lives from time to time can also help in creating an *intimate* classroom. Stevick (1980) calls this the *removal of the teacher's mask*, and some of the strategies his research suggests include being friendly with students, engaging them in conversations, mixing in small talk from time to time, and speaking to them on a one to one basis more often.

### **Moving Away from the Evaluation Paradigm**

Another way for teachers to create *intimacy* in the language classroom is to move away from the *evaluation paradigm*. This includes less *positive* evaluation, as well as *negative* evaluation. According to Stevick (1980), it is the evaluative environment that causes stress, not the content. In a review of research on *feedback*, Williams and Burden (1997) report that students really need to feel that the teacher has a genuine interest in them as people, and not just on evaluating the L2 they produce. Thus, the challenging part for teachers seems to be in having students feel good about themselves without feeling as if they are being evaluated.

One of the ways teachers can move further away from the *evaluation paradigm* in language classrooms is by carefully controlling their use of *error correction*. While students may say on a conscious level that they would like to be corrected strictly, their *anxious* reactions

indicate otherwise. In my experience, overt *error correction* often inhibits students from expressing themselves freely, and can lead to high levels of *anxiety*. Seemingly, teachers would be well served in taking less obtrusive methods in their *error correction*, and waiting until a certain level of trust has been established between themselves and the student.

### Helping Students Cope

There are some other ways teachers can help reduce *language anxiety* in the classroom. First, teachers may be well served in employing activity types that cause lower levels of anxiety (such as pairwork) and gradually introducing activity types that cause higher levels of anxiety (such as speech giving). Moreover, teachers can help the student to better cope with anxiety-provoking situations themselves. Horwitz et al. (1986) suggest techniques such as giving advice on effective language learning strategies, behavioral contracting, and journal keeping. Further, some relaxation exercises such as yoga, meditation, and biofeedback have also been suggested as ways to allay students' anxiety (Doyon, 2000).

### Conclusion

The problem of learners' *language anxiety* remains one of the greatest obstacles teachers have to overcome in language classrooms. In Japan, this problem often stems from and results in cultural misunderstandings. It is my hope to have shed some light on this complex phenomenon, and that by being better informed, teachers will be better equipped to deal with it. The research to date has helped us in our understanding of *language anxiety*, and has provided useful information to teachers as they consider classroom methods and practices. Nonetheless, there is much we do not know about *language anxiety* (particularly about its relationship with other factors such as *motivation*, *personality*, and *self-confidence*) and more research in this area would be fruitful.

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