

Student Confidence and Anxiety in L2 Speaking Activities

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Abstract

Why do some Japanese students experience a tremendous amount of anxiety when communicating in English as a Foreign Language? How can teachers best address issues of anxiety and confidence to assist language learners in moving beyond such limitations? What can be done so that students have the confidence to interact independently of scripted speaking tasks and can genuinely enjoy autonomous conversation inside and outside the classroom? The researchers conducted a questionnaire study on a sample of 62 students of English in their first year at university in Japan. The questionnaire study examined confidence in speaking English as a foreign language (L2) against variables of L2 proficiency, study abroad experience, first language (L1) personality factors, and confidence in speaking with different interlocutors against the variable of English proficiency level. A follow-up focus group study with eight first year students was conducted in order to elicit a more robust understanding of the actual classroom situation. Preliminary findings suggest that L1 personality factors do have a carryover role in L2 classroom speaking performance. The focus group study highlights classroom speaking activities in which students enjoy varying levels of confidence.

Rationale

Each April in Japan, a fresh contingent of students begins their studies at university. Most of these students have spent a considerable amount of time and energy developing English language skills. Why then do some students experience a tremendous amount of anxiety when communicating in English? In what ways does this anxiety hinder the ability of students to speak and participate autonomously in the classroom? How can students, teachers and support staff best address these issues of anxiety and confidence to assist language learners in moving beyond such limitations?

Literature Review

In both anecdotal accounts and in formal studies, foreign language anxiety has clearly been shown to have a negative impact on performance in the foreign language classroom (Aida, 1994; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). However, Sparks and Ganschow (1991) have argued to the contrary that, rather than affective factors such as motivation, anxiety or attitude, 'native *language* factors are likely to be implicated as the main variable in foreign language learning' (p. 10). Sparks, Ganschow and Javorsky (2000) contend that some sort of cognitive handicap is the cause of both low proficiency in a second language (L2 hereafter) and the accompanying anxiety. In a series of arguments and rebuttals (culminating with Horwitz, 2000; Sparks, Ganschow, & Javorsky, 2000), Horwitz acknowledges that some L2 learners may be anxious and perform poorly in an L2 because of 'cognitive or first language disabilities or both' (p. 256). Horwitz argues vehemently, however, 'that some people are anxious of language learning independent of processing deficits and that such anxiety reactions can interfere with language learning' (p. 256). This latter

statement has been borne out in a number of studies (Aida, 1994; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Gardner, Tremblay & Masgoret, 1997; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 2000). Neither Horwitz (2000) nor MacIntyre (1995) contest that cognitive factors, in some cases, play a role in L2 performance and anxiety. However, both researchers believe it is dangerous to discount the role of affective factors in language acquisition. To quote Horwitz (2000), '[t]here is a great deal of harm in denying anxiety reactions' (p. 257).

Research Questions

Given the widespread feeling among researchers that anxiety is harmful to L2 performance, it was felt that the nature of anxiety in the L2 classroom deserves a closer look. Specifically with regard to their university's emphasis on learner autonomy, the researchers felt the need for a closer examination of how anxiety limits participation inside and outside the English classroom. The following research questions were formulated:

- 1 What factors influence L2 student confidence in speaking English?
- 2 How can students, teachers and support staff best address these issues of anxiety and confidence to assist language learners in moving beyond such limitations?

Methods

This research project has taken two routes: a questionnaire and several focus groups. For the first part of this study, the researchers administered an internet-based questionnaire to 62 participants in their first semester of university. For the second part of this study, the researchers held focus groups with first-year students. The methodology, resulting data and analyses are described below.

Questionnaire Methodology

The survey data was collected from 62 first-year students in the English department of a small university of foreign languages in Eastern Japan. The researchers used *SurveyMonkey* online software to administer the questionnaire during a lunchtime break in the first semester of study. Participants all spoke Japanese as their first language (L1) and were studying English as an L2. The language proficiency of the participants varied, though all students had to score highly enough on entrance exams to be admitted into the English department of the university. The questionnaire consisted of approximately 30 items with multiple parts. The questionnaire was conducted in English, a natural limitation that will be mentioned in the Discussion section. See Appendix A for a printed version of the questionnaire items.

Questionnaire Data Analysis

The researchers, with the help of an experienced in-house statistician, exported the data from *SurveyMonkey* and ran analyses of the data using SPSS. One-way ANOVAs were used to determine the existence of unique groups, and Pearson Correlation and t-tests were used to measure correlation. The researchers accumulated a wealth of data (given 30 items with multiple parts) and examined four main categories:

1. Confidence speaking in the English classroom versus L2 proficiency level
2. Confidence speaking in the English classroom versus study abroad experience
3. Confidence speaking in the English classroom versus L1 personality factors
4. Confidence with different speakers versus L2 proficiency level

Questionnaire Results

Confidence Speaking in the English Classroom

The researchers used the following five statements to determine *Confidence speaking in the English classroom*:

- a) The teacher asks you a question in front of the entire class.
- b) The teacher asks you to find/choose a partner.
- c) The teacher asks you to speak with a partner.
- d) The teacher asks you to have a small group discussion.
- e) You have a question to ask in front of the entire class.

The students were asked to mark their responses on a Likert scale with the following levels: 1. very comfortable, 2. comfortable, 3. a little uncomfortable, and 4. very uncomfortable. The responses to the five questions were collapsed into one metric and measured against study abroad experience, L2 proficiency level, and L1 personality factors.

Confidence Speaking in the English Classroom by L2 Proficiency Level

The differences in confidence between upper and lower proficiency levels were not found to be statistically significant. Instead, it appeared that situational factors such as large group versus pairings better predicted confidence than did language proficiency.

Confidence Speaking in the English Classroom by Study Abroad Experience

The researchers looked at L2 confidence in the classroom and controlled for whether or not the students had studied abroad. Though interesting patterns occurred, as with proficiency level (noted above), the results were not found to be statistically significant.

Confidence Speaking in the English Classroom by L1 Personality Factors

The researchers were interested in knowing if aspects of introversion/extroversion in the L1 (Japanese) were predictive of confidence speaking English in the classroom. The personality factors were measured by the following questions:

1. If you're with a group of 5 friends in Japan who are looking for a restaurant, how often would you be the one to ask for directions?
2. If you're with a group of friends in a video store, how often will you give your suggestion for a movie?
3. If you're taking a trip with friends, how often will you do the planning?
4. In Japanese classrooms, if the teacher asks the class a question in Japanese, how often do you raise your hand?

The students were asked to answer in accordance with the following Likert scale: 1. very often, 2. often, 3. sometimes, and 4. never. After performing a Pearson correlation, a small but statistically significant correlation was found at the .05 level.

Confidence with Different Speakers by L2 Proficiency Level

The researchers were interested in determining if type of interlocutor played a role in participant speaking confidence (comfort speaking with different interlocutors is examined by item No. 19 in Appendix A). The data show a small but statistically significant difference between the students of upper and lower proficiency levels. The students of lower proficiency indicated a slightly higher level of confidence in speaking English with other Japanese students of English.

Questionnaire Data Discussion

As reported above, neither study abroad experience nor L2 proficiency was found to be predictive of speaking confidence. While Matsuda and Gobel (2004) found that overseas experience generally resulted in lower anxiety, the current measure of experience abroad allowed for an experience of just two weeks, which might not be sufficient for any gains to be realised. The follow-up study will identify students with experience abroad as those who have sojourned for 30 days or more. A similar concern was found with the operationalisation of the construct L2 proficiency. L2 proficiency had been determined by class placement, whereas a more accurate measure of this construct would have been to use the participant scores on the actual placement exam. The researchers have since acquired access to these exam scores and will be using them in their follow-up study.

Not surprisingly, a small but statistically significant correlation was found between L1 personality factors (extroversion/introversion) and L2 speaking confidence in the classroom. It is intuitive that students who are more expressive in their L1 will tend to have greater confidence when speaking in the L2. Dewaele (2002), in his study of trilingual students in Belgium, reports that introversion is positively correlated with communication anxiety and negatively correlated with achievement.

Interestingly, there was also a small but statistically significant correlation between the lower proficiency level students and their comfort in speaking with other Japanese students. It appears that some students less proficient in English felt more comfortable speaking with Japanese interlocutors than did their cohorts of a greater proficiency level. Perhaps students of a higher English level feel silly communicating in the L2 when Japanese communication would be easier, more natural and straightforward. Perhaps there is a greater awareness (or greater fear) among higher level students of the disconnect between the thoughts they would like to express and the thoughts they are able to express. Such a disconnect is explained by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) as being one of the main causes of foreign language classroom anxiety. It is the opinion of the researchers that more studies of a qualitative nature should be undertaken to more fully understand the level of confidence experienced by L2 learners when speaking the L2.

The researchers feel that the lack of statistically significant data is not necessarily indicative of little or no correlation between the factors examined and L2 speaking confidence in the classroom. There were a number of shortcomings in this questionnaire study. First, at 62 respondents, the sample size was much too small, and at 30 items, the questionnaire was slightly too long. In the future, the researchers aim to reduce the number of items and repeat the same questions in multiple formats in order to achieve greater reliability. The researchers also acknowledge that they must more carefully define their constructs, as has been examined above and will be further discussed in the section on future research.

A second concern is that students were asked to self-report their levels of confidence in various situations. As one might expect, though two students may have identical feelings for a given situation, one student may mark very comfortable (1) and another comfortable (2). The problem is that it is extremely difficult to quantify a feeling like confidence.

It must also be mentioned that students self-selected to be part of this study. It is not overly difficult to imagine that students who choose to participate in a foreign language research study are likely to enjoy greater levels of confidence overall.

Another concern is that the researchers are examining individual differences in learners. It is therefore expected that it may be difficult for the results to be generalised to a larger population of learners.

Finally, it is necessary to regard the data with scepticism, since the participants answered the questionnaire in their L2 (English). Future investigations into L2 speaking anxiety should be administered in the L1 so as to minimise the possibility that participants do not fully understand the questionnaire items.

Focus Group Methodology

The focus group data was collected from eight volunteer freshman participants. The researchers facilitated discussion among participants and began with a set of questions about student confidence in different situations. The students were further encouraged to respond to each others' comments. The focus group discussions lasted approximately 40 minutes. See Appendix B for the protocol used in the focus groups.

Focus Group Data Analysis

One researcher conducted the focus group, while another systematically recorded notes. An audio recording was also made. The researchers used their discretion in categorising different participant stories into high-confidence, medium-confidence and low-confidence situations. The results of the data analysis follow in the next section.

Focus Group Results

Teacher Factors

Instructional Factors

With regard to instruction, the data indicate that teachers need to make clear to students that making mistakes in class is acceptable. Also, assignments that are given in class should be appropriate to student ability levels, so that students can be successful (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001).

Non-Instructional Factors

The focus group data seem to indicate that students expect teachers to be friendly and approachable, which may help lower student anxiety. Burden (2004) similarly advocates that the teacher 'act more as an advisor or even a friend' (p. 8).

Group/Interlocutor Factors

Students in the focus groups seemed to prefer speaking in small groups rather than speaking in front of the whole class. This sort of modification can be easily implemented by the classroom teacher and helps to create a non-threatening learning environment as advocated by Aida (1994). In terms of speaking with Japanese peers in English, different opinions were expressed. One participant indicated discomfort in speaking English with native speakers of Japanese, because it felt 'weird'. Another participant felt comfortable speaking with Japanese people because of perceived similar linguistic challenges. It is thus necessary to be attuned to an individual learner's perceptions and needs.

Topic Factors

The participants reported that the combination of group size and the nature of conversational topics affected their speaking confidence. Content that is familiar and easy to understand appears to facilitate their confidence.

Changes in Confidence

A few participants reported a decrease in their confidence from the time of their entrance to university for reasons such as negative comparisons with other students and a perceived realisation of insufficient speaking ability. However, the participants also indicated that this decrease in confidence was sometimes a motivating factor in their English learning. Dewaele (2002) makes the case that foreign language anxiety may not be an enduring trait and that such anxiety may be mitigated by other factors. Such a finding is good news for educators in that teacher interventions, if done properly, can have a positive effect on anxiety. Several students in the focus groups reported that their levels of anxiety decreased after attending an informal two-day retreat with classmates and teachers in a mountain setting.

Strategies

Some participants reported that useful strategies for increasing their speaking confidence include out-of-class activities, such as talking with friends, sending e-mails, learning useful phrases and participating in extra learning tasks. It should be noted that this question was not asked of all focus group participants, so generalisation is limited.

Conclusion

The results of the questionnaire study suggest that there is a correlation between willingness of students to express themselves in their L1 and their confidence in speaking their L2. Student proficiency level in the L2 may also correlate with comfort speaking to other L2 learners. Finally, students appear to enjoy greater confidence in pairs and small groups than in whole-class situations, regardless of proficiency level.

The results of the focus group study suggest that teacher behaviour plays a large role in how confidently students use the L2 in class. Small group discussions and topics that are familiar to students can enhance the level of comfort.

Future Research

The researchers have begun the process of conducting a study much larger in scope. A study of diaries of five students written over a period of six weeks has enabled the researchers to further focus their investigations on confidence-threatening oral activities in the classroom. The findings from the diary study have helped to inform a new survey soon to be conducted among first- and second-year students. This survey will also incorporate questions from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), a scale that has been replicated numerous times (see Aida, 1994; Burden, 2004; Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 2000) and enjoys a high degree of validity and reliability (Horwitz, 1986). The scale will replace previous questionnaire items seeking to measure the construct of foreign language classroom anxiety. The researchers also intend to adapt a scale of shyness from McCroskey and Richmond (1982) to replace previous items addressing the affective factors of shyness versus gregariousness. It is hoped that through the use of the two established scales, a questionnaire that incorporates items gleaned from the diary study and a larger sample of participants, the researchers can shed more light on the causes and effects of anxiety in the foreign language classroom.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument (Printed Replication of Online Survey)

1. Please enter your student ID number:
2. Please select your class:
3. Are you male or female?
4. Have you ever lived or studied abroad for two weeks or more?
5. Where have you lived and/or studied?
6. How much time did you spend in the country above?
7. How old were you when you first visited the country above?
8. With whom were you able to speak English while you were abroad? (Please select all that apply to you): homestay families, roommates, friends from that country, international friends, Japanese friends, special classes for foreign students, regular classes for all students, coworkers, teachers, teammates, other
9. How comfortable were you when speaking English with the following people?
1. very comfortable; 2. comfortable; 3. a little uncomfortable; 4. very uncomfortable
(Please select all that apply to you):
homestay families, roommates, friends from that country, international friends, Japanese friends, special classes for foreign students, regular classes for all students, coworkers, teachers, teammates, other as noted above
10. *Repeat of questions 5-9 for students who have lived/studied abroad in multiple countries*
11. Before coming to (university), what opportunities did you have to speak English outside of the school classroom? (Please select all that apply to you): cram school (juku), English conversation school (eikaiwa); private tutors; English speaking friends/family; part-time work, other
12. How comfortable were you when speaking English in the following situations? (Please select all that apply to you): at cram school (juku), at English conversation school (eikaiwa); with private tutors; with English speaking friends/family; at your part-time work, other as noted above
13. If you're with a group of 5 friends in Japan who are looking for a restaurant, how often would you be the one to ask for directions?
1. very often; 2 often; 3 sometimes, 4. never
14. If you're with a group of friends in a video store, how often will you give your suggestion for a movie?
1. very often; 2 often; 3 sometimes, 4. never
15. If you're taking a trip with your friends, how often will you do the planning?
1. very often; 2 often; 3 sometimes, 4. never
16. In Japanese classrooms, if the teacher asks the class a question in Japanese, how often do you raise your hand?
1. very often; 2 often; 3 sometimes, 4. never
17. In English classrooms, if the teacher asks the class a question in English, how often do you raise your hand?
1. very often; 2 often; 3 sometimes, 4. never
18. In an English class, how do you feel in the following situations?
1. very comfortable; 2. comfortable; 3. a little uncomfortable; 4. very uncomfortable
the teacher asks you a question in front of the entire class; the teacher asks you to find/choose a partner; the teacher asks you to speak with a partner; the teacher asks you to have a small group discussion; you have a question to ask in front of the entire class
19. How comfortable are you when speaking with the following people in English?
1. very comfortable; 2. comfortable; 3. a little uncomfortable; 4. very uncomfortable
native speaker teachers; Japanese teachers; international students (not Japanese); Japanese students; English learners who are better than you at English; English learners who aren't as good as you are at English
20. On average, how often do you use the SALC [Self Access Learning Centre]?

- 21. What part of the SALC do you use most? Why?**
- 22. We would like to talk a little more with some students about their answers. Would you be interested in meeting with us to talk about this survey?**
- 23. [If Yes to question 22] Please enter your email address below:**

Appendix B: Protocol for Focus Groups

Possible Dialogue:

Hi we're _____ & _____. We've noticed that sometimes students are quite shy when speaking English. We're interested in finding out more about student confidence so that we can help students feel more comfortable using their English.

Today, we're going to ask you to discuss your experiences using English. This is a very informal conversation. Please don't hesitate to ask each other questions, comment upon each other's answers and so forth. In fact, we *want* you to do these things. Please relax and have a very natural discussion.

Okay? (pause). Alright, let's begin.

- 1 Tell us about a time when you felt really confident speaking in English. Why do you think you felt that way?
- 2 Tell us about a time when you felt quite uncomfortable speaking in English. Why do you think you felt that way?
- 3 Let's look at these questions:

In an English class, how do you feel in the following situations?

The teacher asks you a question in front of the entire class.

The teacher asks you to find/choose a partner.

The teacher asks you to speak with a partner.

The teacher asks you to have a small group discussion.

You have a question to ask in front of the entire class.

- 1 What can teachers do to make you feel more comfortable? What can students do?
- 2 Do you have any strategies that you use to boost your confidence and decrease your anxiety?
- 3 How did you feel using English in April of this year? What made you feel that way?
- 4 How do you feel now? What do you think are some reasons for these changes?
- 5 Can we ask you follow-up questions if we think of any?

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