

## **Coping with anxiety and improving learning strategies: Japanese ESL learners in the UK**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to explore the roles of anxiety in language learning as well as skills and strategies to manage anxiety in a study-abroad ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom context by examining Japanese students learning English in the UK (United Kingdom). This research employed questionnaires to study the experiences of 35 Japanese students who were currently learning English at two different British universities. Further interviews were also conducted with six students in the courses mentioned above and four teachers who were in charge of the courses. The fieldwork was done in May and July of the same year in order to obtain comparative data for the retrospective research. The Japanese students felt anxiety in particular while speaking English in the classroom and identified similar negative effects that were similar to those reported in earlier SLA (Second Language Acquisition) research. It was also found that many students often employed learning strategies to cope with their anxiety and the perceptions of learners changed over a learning period – more students became less nervous and got used to the new teaching style and activities for learning English in the UK environment.

**Key words:** anxiety, learning strategies, study-abroad, communication skills

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

As our society has become more global, it has become increasingly common for Japanese students to learn foreign languages abroad. The focus of this study is, from the standpoint of the ESL classroom, Japanese students who aim to improve their English by staying in the UK for nearly one year. A number of researchers have pointed out that students tend to feel fear or anxiety in the second language classroom (Horwitz et al., 1986; McCoy, 1979). However there are not many studies which focus on students in a study-abroad context. The main purposes of this research are to examine the language-learning anxiety experienced by Japanese students, especially in speaking and communicating during their courses, and to suggest some appropriate techniques and strategies for managing their anxiety. On the basis of these aims, the following questions are addressed:

1. How does anxiety affect Japanese students in the English classroom?
2. What kind of learning strategies do Japanese students use to overcome their anxiety related to learning difficulties?

3. What are the main difficulties experienced by teachers when teaching English to Japanese students?
4. How do teachers overcome problems of interaction with Japanese students?

This article is divided into five sections. In this section, the purpose of the study is presented. The next section considers the literature on language learning anxiety in order to define and clarify the relationship between anxiety and second language learning. Then, the research methods to collect and analyze data are described. The following section introduces the results of the study and discusses them with regard to the research questions. The final section presents a summary of the main findings, the limitations of this study and suggestions for further research.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Notion of 'anxiety' in language learning**

A large number of studies have found that anxiety may interfere with many types of learning and have emphasized its important role in the fields of education and psychology. For instance, Horwitz et al. (1986) stress that anxiety is a major obstacle to overcome in learning to speak another language, although the levels of anxiety vary according to individual learners and their motivation. However, anxiety is not necessarily only a debilitating factor which prevents the learner from achieving the expected goals, but it can also be a strong motivational variable, which can stimulate learners (Zhang, 2001). Several studies also support this positive relationship between anxiety and second language achievement (Chastain, 1975; Kleinmann, 1977). In particular, Skehan (1989: 115) points out that "some anxiety may be beneficial and energizing." However it may be difficult to determine how much these positive effects of anxiety contribute to the total language performance.

### **2.2 Anxiety in foreign language classrooms**

Is there something specific about anxiety in relation to the foreign language classroom? McCoy (1979:185) mentions that, "students frequently enter the second language classroom with fears and anxieties." Horwitz et al. (1986) examined whether language anxiety is related to communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation by classmates and the teacher. The results indicate that foreign language anxiety can be distinguished from other types of anxiety and that it can have a negative effect on both the language learning process and production. Therefore, it is worth exploring here which aspects of learning languages are the main causes of anxiety, what kinds of problems anxious students tend to suffer from in foreign language classes and what aspects of the classroom environment are likely to increase learners' anxiety.

### **2.3 Tasks which cause the most anxiety**

Many students feel anxious when speaking a foreign language or being called on in language class (Donley, 1999). Horwitz et al. (1986) reveal that speaking publicly in the target language is extremely 'anxiety-provoking.' Students in their study endorsed the following items (bracketing 'strongly agree' and 'agree'); "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language

class" (49%), "I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class" (33%), "I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do" (31%). They also note that anxious students tend to fear making mistakes while speaking and feel frustrated about their inability to present their ideas and express themselves in the target language. Price (1991) examined what made students most anxious in foreign language classes and found that speaking a foreign language in front of other students resulted in the greatest anxiety. The students mainly feared "being laughed at" or "making fools of themselves." He also reports that students worry about their non-native accent and making pronunciation errors. A number of studies link anxiety to lower performance or course grades (Aida, 1994; Saito & Samimy, 1996). Many studies found a significant correlation between anxiety and performance in oral examinations (Phillips, 1992; Young, 1986). Foss and Reitzel (1988: 438) explain the difference between the anxiety associated with foreign language learning and general communication anxiety:

Language learners have the dual task not only of learning a second language but of performing in it, whereas anxious speakers in a communication classroom generally have only performance concerns. In addition, second language learners may have difficulty understanding others, a problem that usually is not common for native speakers. Furthermore, foreign language anxiety entails a risk to self beyond that experienced by a native speaker because the speaker knows he or she cannot present the self fully in the new language.

Thus the anxiety experienced by native speakers of a language is not as same as that experienced by non-native speakers.

#### **2.4 Japanese students and their anxiety in language learning**

Japanese students tend to have anxiety about speaking in front of other students and they are likely to be afraid of 'taking risks.' They often do not speak until they are called on (Koba et al., 2000). This tendency of Japanese students to remain silent has been attributed to several cultural features such as:

- Japanese people value harmony and avoid opposing anyone directly.
- Japanese tend to be indirect in their communication.
- They often interpret feelings and convey a minimum of verbal messages and a maximum of nonverbal ones, so that the communicator's feelings or attitudes are crucial.

(Ishii et al., 1978 cited in Lucas, 1984: 595)

Regarding English education in Japan, Lucas (1984: 594) points out the poor English speaking ability of Japanese students and the negative aspects of "teaching methods which rely heavily on tightly controlled drills and exercises." Koba et al. (2000) also stress that English teaching in Japan still focuses on grammar and translation exercises, although there is more and

more demand to improve communicative competence.

### III. METHOD

#### 3.1 Questionnaires

##### 3.1.1 Participants

The respondents to the survey were 35 Japanese students who experienced learning English in ESL classrooms in the UK. They belonged to the following two groups:

- 1) 21 students aged 18-31 (average age, 19) in a one-year foundation course at a university in Wales (*University W*) in April, 2003. This course included 21 hours of lessons per week.
- 2) 14 students aged 20-35 (average age, 24) who started a one-year study abroad program in April, 2003. The course included pre-sessional foundation modules and 23 hours of lessons per week at a university in England (*University E*).

##### 3.1.2 Procedure and design

This research was conducted at the end of May and July, 2003, in order to obtain comparative and retrospective data. Both questionnaires were written in Japanese and included open- and closed-questions. The closed-questions were followed by a four-point rating scale, with the choices of either "often, sometimes, seldom, never" or "strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree." More than half of the questions were taken from the model questionnaires introduced by Horwitz et al. (1986), Clément et al. (1994), Oxford (1990), Gardner (1985) and Dörnyei (2001). The data from the closed-questions was entered in the statistics program, SPSS Version 11.5. According to Cohen and Manion (1994), it is reasonable to employ a statistical survey when there are 30 or more participants.

#### 3.2 Interviews

##### 3.2.1 Participants

This survey was conducted in the same courses where the questionnaires were administered. The interviewees were 4 native English-speaking teachers who were in charge of teaching English to Japanese students and 6 Japanese students learning English.

	<i>University W</i>	<i>University E</i>
<i>Teachers' names</i>	Helen (f), Sandra (f)	Geoff (m), Mike (m)
<i>Students' names</i>	Tomo (f), Miki (f), Kaori (f)	Takao (m), Ken (m), Yumi (f)

Figure 1. Participants of interviewees

##### 3.2.2 Procedure and design

The interviews with the teachers were conducted in English and with the students in Japanese on the days the questionnaires were filled in. Semi-structured interviews were employed to provide an appropriate levels of flexibility and yet keep the interview on the right track (Wallace, 1998). Every interview was held individually for about 30 minutes and audio-recorded with the permission

of the interviewees. The following topics were raised in the main part of the interview:

<b>Teachers' interviews</b>	<b>Students' interviews</b>
1. General impression of Japanese students	1. General impression of learning English in the UK
2. Difficulties in teaching Japanese students in the classroom	2. Difficulties in learning English
3. Problems and causes of the difficulties	3. Ways of dealing with the difficulties
4. Ways of dealing with the difficulties	4. Affective matters (e.g. How do you feel when you have to speak in English in class?)
5. Suggestions for Japanese students	5. Activities in which you feel comfortable and confident
6. Individual differences among students	6. Cultural differences between them and their teachers
7. Cultural differences between them and their students	7. Suggestions for encouraging other students
8. Other information	

**Figure 2. Question topics for interviews**

Retrospective versions of the interviews that were carried out in July 2003 with both teachers and students had almost the same contents, but there were several additional questions concerning the progress of the students and changes in the courses.

### 3.3 Observations

Observations were carried out before the questionnaires were distributed in the classroom. Each observed lesson lasted approximately 40 minutes. The researcher used the non-participant type of observation and mainly took note of the following points: interactions, teacher's actions, student's actions, the use of materials, tasks and activities, and other matters (classroom settings, environment, atmosphere etc.).

## IV. FINDINGS

This section mainly reports the results from the questionnaires which include 25 items and compares the responses from the two different months. These questions are all closed-ended and categorized under the following six themes: feeling & attitude toward second language class [Q1-5], speech anxiety & fear of negative evaluation [Q6-9], managing one's emotions [Q10&11], confidence & comfortable feeling in the second language classroom [Q12-16], learning with others [Q17-19], and compensating for missing knowledge [Q20-25]. Each item has a four-point rating scale with the choices of either "strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D), strongly disagree (SD)" or "often (O), sometimes (So), seldom (Se), never (N)." The numbers below indicate how many students chose each alternative answer.

**Table 1. Theme 1: Feeling & attitude toward second language class**

Scale:	SA	A	D	SD
1. I feel that the level of my English class is higher than that of my current English ability.				
May	6	15	13	1
July	1	11	21	2

2. The way English is taught here is different from that of Japan. (July: I have gotten used to the English teaching method here.)

May	9	20	6	0
July	1	30	4	0

3. I am used to being taught English by native-speaker teachers. (July: I have gotten used to being taught English by native-speaker teachers.)

May	4	10	17	4
July	10	25	0	0

4. I feel it is rude to ask questions while the teacher is speaking.

May	1	11	18	5
July	2	12	19	2

5. I feel comfortable staying quiet [not presenting my opinions] during my English class.

May	7	19	8	1
July	6	14	15	0

The answers to question 1 show that 60% of the students (21 out of 35) felt in May that the level of their English class was higher than their own, but only a third of students had this feeling in July. The majority of the students (83%) also felt in the beginning that the English teaching method in the UK was different from that in Japan [Q2]. However, by July 89% of the students had already gotten used to the English teaching method in their courses. Similarly, well over half of the students said that they were used to being taught English by native-speaker teachers in May, but all of the students had adjusted to the new teaching style by July [Q3]. In addition, the students felt less comfortable staying quiet during their class in July [Q5]. Yet, more than a third of the students still felt even in July that it was rude to interrupt teachers with questions while they were talking [Q4].

**Table 2. Theme 2: Speech anxiety & fear of negative evaluation**

Scale: \_\_\_\_\_ 0 \_\_\_\_\_ So \_\_\_\_\_ Se \_\_\_\_\_ N

6. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.

May	9	21	5	0
July	7	14	14	0

7. I get uneasy when I have to speak in English.

May	14	18	3	0
July	5	22	8	1

8. I tend to feel that the other students speak English better than I do.

May	19	12	3	1
July	17	15	3	0

9. I am afraid that other students might laugh at me when I speak English.

May	4	9	15	7
July	2	8	23	2

According to the answers to questions 6 and 7, it is clear that the degree of the learners' nervousness and uneasiness had decreased by July. For example, 40% of the students said in July that they **seldom** got nervous and confused when speaking, while only 14% did so in May. 40% of the students also **often** felt uneasy when they had to speak in English in May, whereas there were only six students who felt the same in July (17%). The answers to question 8 show that nearly half the students **often** felt inferior to other students both in May and July. However, less than half of the students were worried about being laughed at by others while speaking [Q9].

**Table 3. Theme 3: Managing your emotions**

Scale:	O	So	Se	N
10. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of speaking English.				
May	3	22	8	2
July	6	20	7	2
11. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.				
May	14	16	5	0
July	12	15	7	1

Responses to these two questions indicate that students consciously tried to control their feelings in speaking. Over half of the students **sometimes** tried to relax when they felt afraid of speaking English in both months. In addition, more than a third of the students **often** tended to encourage themselves to speak English in spite of the possibilities of making mistakes.

**Table 4. Theme 4: Confidence and comfortable feeling in the second language classroom**

Scale:	SA	A	D	SD
12. It doesn't matter if I make mistakes in speaking English.				
May	4	15	14	2
July	2	14	17	2
13. I am the type who asks questions voluntarily in my English class.				
May	2	10	17	6
July	1	16	11	7
14. I am the type who answers voluntarily in my English class.				
May	5	10	14	6
July	2	17	10	6
15. I feel comfortable speaking English, whether working in groups or pairs.				
May	4	18	11	2
July	7	23	5	0
16. I am sure I will be able to learn English well.				
May	3	23	8	1
July	4	24	7	0

According to question 12, more than half of the students **agreed** with the item, “It doesn’t matter if I make mistakes in speaking English” in both months. Nevertheless, many students actively tried to improve their abilities by voluntarily asking and answering questions [Q13&14]. The number of students that voluntarily contributed to these class activities increased over the assessed time as they got used to speaking the target language. The answers to question 15 show that while nearly a third of the students **disagreed** with the statement, “I feel comfortable speaking English, whether working in groups or pairs” in May, only a few did so in July. Furthermore, the majority of students (80%) answered in July that they were sure they would be able to learn English well [Q16].

**Table 5. Theme 5: Learning with others**

Scale:	O	So	Se	N
17. I practice English with my current classmates.				
May	2	18	12	3
July	3	17	10	5
18. I ask for help from my classmates.				
May	9	19	7	0
July	12	19	3	1
19. I ask for help from native-speaker teachers.				
May	7	21	7	0
July	5	26	3	1

The answers to the three questions in this part reveal that the students learned English through the assistance of other students and their teachers. Well over half of the students had the experience of practicing English with their classmates [Q17], and a considerable proportion of students **often** or **sometimes** asked for help from their classmates or their native-speaker teachers [Q18&19].

**Table 6. Theme 6: Compensating for missing knowledge**

Scale:	O	So	Se	N
20. I guess the meaning of unfamiliar English words.				
May	17	17	1	0
July	17	17	1	0
21. I try to anticipate what the other person will say next in a conversation in English.				
May	13	13	8	1
July	8	19	8	0
22. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I make gestures.				
May	15	15	5	0
July	15	16	4	0



23. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.

May	17	15	3	0
July	22	9	4	0

24. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.

May	6	11	18	0
July	4	15	14	2

25. I tend to think in Japanese while speaking English.

May	15	11	8	1
July	8	19	8	0

Most students compensated for their insufficient knowledge by using learning strategies. More than 95% of the students **often** or **sometimes** guessed the meaning of unfamiliar English words [Q20]. 43% of the students **often** made gestures when they could not think of a word during an English conversation [Q22]. Interestingly, the number of students using these strategies remained the same in May and July. In contrast, the number of students that anticipated what the other person would say next decreased in July [Q21]. It may be the case that this was due to improvement in their listening ability. According to the answers to question 23, there were more students in July (63%) than in May (49%) who **often** used a similar word or phrase when they could not think of an English word. And nearly half of the students **often** or **sometimes** made up new words when they did not know the correct English vocabulary [Q24]. Question 25 reveals that fewer students in July **often** tended to think in Japanese while speaking English (May:43% / July:23%).

## V. DISCUSSION

This section aims to answer each of the research questions by focusing on key findings and develops the discussion by reviewing the empirical research explained above.

### 5.1 How does anxiety affect Japanese students in the English classrooms?

According to Table 1 and Table 2, it was found that most of Japanese students got nervous and felt uneasy when speaking English in their classrooms. This study confirmed the previously reported findings (Horwitz et al., 1986), but also revealed that the level of language anxiety became lower over 2 months as students got used to the learning styles and types of activities in the new environment. One of the interviewed teachers, Mike, pointed out that “Japanese students in particular tend to suffer from a higher level of anxiety.” In fact, one student (Tomo) mentioned her difficulties in processing and producing English when asking questions during classes. The need to translate ideas and construct sentences in English within a limited time was a significant factor in inducing her anxiety. She also pointed out problems with paying attention to proper pronunciation, as Price (1991) reported above. Foss and Reizel (1988) previously stressed this kind of *dual tasks* of learning the foreign language as well as of performing in it. However, the learner’s personality is likely to affect the level of his/her anxiety. An interviewed teacher, Sandra, talked about a student who seems a “born worrier”, and mentioned that “even when she performs very well, she tends to

worry about something. She may be setting her goals too high.”

## **5.2 What kind of learning strategies do Japanese students use to overcome their anxiety related to learning difficulties?**

The researcher mainly focuses on the three following types of learning strategies: affective strategies (managing one’s emotions), social strategies (learning with others) and compensation strategies (compensating for missing knowledge) (Oxford, 1990). In terms of affective strategies, it was found that more than 70% of the participants tried to relax or encourage themselves when they felt afraid of speaking English, both in May and July (see. Table 3). Some interviewed students presented examples of advice to prevent nervousness, such as reflecting that even if you make mistakes, you will not be punished (Yumi) or believing that nobody will laugh at you (Miki). It was also found that the majority of students employed social strategies by asking for help from their classmates or the English teachers (see. Table 4 & 5). Regarding compensation strategies, there seemed to be no great differences in the frequency of the use over the two-month period, as no special strategy training was provided.

## **5.3 What are the main difficulties experienced by teachers when teaching English to Japanese students?**

In the interviews, most teachers mentioned that they had made an effort to encourage their Japanese students to speak in their class and to improve their analytical skills. For example, Geoff advised that it was important to sensitize students the differences between the educational culture of their own country and the educational system in the UK:

*“Japanese students are going through the Japanese education system. They may be aware that the target education culture is different. We try to sensitize students to cultural differences. We look at cultural stereotypes and cultural expectations. So the student will be aware of these cultural difficulties at least something called cultural bumps.”*

Another teacher, Sandra, reported that there was neither ‘yes’ or ‘no’ when she asked questions to her Japanese students, and they seemed afraid of taking the risk of revealing their ideas in her class. The interviewed teachers considered that the main causes of Japanese weaknesses are likely to derive from their cultural and educational background in addition to linguistic problems. These problems were supported by the findings of Koba et al. (2000) and Lucas (1984) (see 2.4). Most of the Japanese students (over 80%) recognized difference in the way in which English was taught in the UK and more than half of them had not gotten used to being taught English by native-speaker teachers, especially in May (see. Table 1). However, some interviewed students mentioned that they were encouraged a lot by teachers’ positive comments and words such as “Good!” or “Excellent!”

#### **5.4 How do teachers overcome problems of interaction with Japanese students?**

In order to improve learners' speaking and communication skills, it has been emphasized that teachers need to recognize and reduce the learners' anxiety from physical, verbal and psychological standpoints (Young, 1992; Donley, 1999). In fact, Mike suggested that learning to read Japanese facial expressions was very important for catching signals or messages in communicating with them. Teachers may need to pay attention to learners' signals of anxiety (e.g. blushing, trembling, stammering), and to watch for anxiety-related avoidance behaviors (e.g. skipping class, avoiding eye contact with the teacher, and sitting in the back row (Donley, 1999).

The interviewed teachers gave further advice for reducing learners' anxiety, such as showing models (Mike), encouraging the learners to speak English in the class, coping with error corrections carefully (Geoff, Helen), creating a friendly classroom atmosphere by establishing good relationships with the students (Mike, Sandra), and dealing with individual differences, especially with quieter students (Helen, Geoff). These teaching strategies were confirmed by observation as effective in their classrooms of Mike and Helen.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

This study has explored language anxiety in study-abroad classroom contexts by investigating Japanese students learning English in the UK. The findings of this research confirmed that the students were apt to feel anxiety in speaking a foreign language, and identified the negative effects with similar problems and causes to those reported in earlier studies. It was also found that the students often employed several learning strategies for managing their anxiety as described previously in Oxford (1990). The teachers' comments concerning effective activities and techniques to cope with learners' anxiety were in keeping with the suggestions.

The present study revealed that the learners' anxiety was likely to change and mainly to decrease over the learning period as the students got used to the new environment and as their teachers made efforts to reduce their anxiety. More students felt less nervous, encouraged themselves to speak English and were used to being involved in pair work or asking questions at the end of the surveyed period. In addition, this research found that Japanese students tended to have a weakness in presenting opinions in speaking or discussion because of their cultural and educational experience in Japan. It is hoped that the findings in this study represent a step in understanding the impact of language anxiety of Japanese students and in developing strategies to cope with the problem.

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