Title: The experiences of anxiety of Japanese

EFL learners: A case study.

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<u>Abstract</u>

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety is an educational phenomenon that has gained growing attention among researchers over the past three decades. It is a form of anxiety that can be debilitating and arises from various sources. This research examined foreign language classroom-based anxiety experiences of two adult Japanese English language learners; looking at the experiences of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety: in both secondary and tertiary education settings; and in English language learning environments that the participants experienced in both Japan and the United States of America. Furthermore, this research investigated the effects of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety on learning outcomes and oral performance. Findings from this study into the effects of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety on learning outcomes and oral performance of participants indicated that sociocultural factors; learner motivation; self-efficacy; and the perceptions that learners have of their classroom learning environments influence learning outcomes and oral performance in the classroom. Findings indicated that anxiety in foreign language classroom learning experiences can be linked with oral performance.

Keywords: EFL, motivation, self-efficacy, situational experiences, sociocultural factors

Introduction

Foreign language anxiety can be defined as an experience of a foreign language that can pose potential problems for a learner with their acquisition, retention, and production of the new language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a). The issue of anxiety in foreign language learning is widely recognized for its significant impact on learners, and this is especially the case in relation to the various sociocultural contexts in which they are required to express themselves when they have a poor command of the foreign language (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre, 1999; Ohata, 2005; Young, 1991). It was a general aim of this research to develop findings that can be used to stimulate further research in Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), particularly in terms of educational and cultural based experiences.

Research Aims & Theoretical Foundations

FLCA experiences among Japanese students have been widely investigated throughout the past decade (Andrade & Williams, 2009; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Ohata, 2005; Yashima, 2002). However, little academic research has taken place into the areas of FLCA that Japanese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) have experienced: in both the settings of secondary and tertiary education; and in both the settings of studying in Japan and in a native English speaking country. The above noted studies have revealed findings about the influence of FLCA on learning outcomes and oral performance, but have not produced consistently similar results. Thus, this research aimed to fulfill the following objectives:

1. to explore the FLCA experiences of two Japanese students from their educational life cycle of secondary education to tertiary education;
2. to explore and compare the similarities and differences of FLCA experiences of two Japanese students at a tertiary level of education in both a domestic setting, that is, Japan and an international setting, that is, the United States of America;
3. to investigate ways in which FLCA may influence learning outcomes and oral performance through the experiences of two Japanese learners.

Social-psychological constructs and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

Prior to undertaking this study, the researcher had observed from the participants during their class time learning several behaviours that are commonly displayed during foreign language FLCA experiences (Andrade & Williams, 2009): physical reactions, for example, excessive perspiration and body shaking movements; psychological reactions, for example, embarrassment, having mental blanks and poor memory recall; and social reactions, for example, inappropriate silence, unwillingness to participate and absenteeism. However, as a result of the focus of this research, findings from the studies referred to in the Background section of this study are connected with social-psychology constructs that relate, either directly or indirectly, to FLCA. Social-psychology can be defined as the study of the manner in which the personality, attitudes, motivations, and behavior of the individual influence and are influenced by social groups (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary). Several social-psychological constructs provided an important theoretical foundation for the study of the phenomenon of FLCA and the research aims of this study:

1. Goal-centred theory:

   which refers to the desire of an individual to behave or respond to a situation in order to accomplish something and find his/her place in that given situation (Dreikurs, 1972);

2. Motivation:

   described as extrinsic, that is, forces outside an individual that drives them to do something, such as future employment prospects, money, status, among others; and/or intrinsic, that is, forces inside an individual that drive them to do something, such as the pursuit of learning or enjoyment (Maslow, 1943);

3. Self-efficacy:

   which refers to an individual's belief that about their competency to succeed being based on performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal arousal, and physiological states (Bandura, 1977); and

4. Sociocultural factors:

   which refers an individual's learning development, including language, beliefs, traditions and behaviours, as being inseparable from its cultural and social context (Vygotsky, 1962).

Background

The first research aim targeted the experiences of two Japanese foreign language learners participating in secondary education experience FLCA. Katalin's study (2006) of 5 Hungarian High school students studying two foreign languages concluded that FLCA was related to situational anxiety, that is to say, anxiety experienced in a well-defined situation (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a). Findings from Katalin's (2006) study were found to be independent of students' level of the permanent characteristic of trait anxiety. Although the initial sample size was 61 participants in the quantitative phase of this study, a small purposive sample of 5 participants was selected for the qualitative phase because these participants exhibited low levels of trait anxiety and higher levels of FLCA in one foreign language studied than the other. Another finding from Katalin's study (2006) was that participants felt that, in relation to FLCA in a secondary school setting, anxiety resulted from perceived competence of the learner. This finding indicated that self-efficacy can be an important factor influencing FLCA. The research to be conducted aimed to learn about the language anxiety experiences that the participants had experienced in secondary and tertiary settings for the purpose of developing larger-scale, in-depth research in the future.

The second research aim targeted the experiences of studying a foreign language in home and host university settings. Several studies have focused on the FLCA experiences of foreign language learners in a native host country (Ohata, 2005; Woodrow, 2006). Ohata's (2005) study of 5 Japanese undergraduate and post-graduate students studying in American universities in a foreign language classroom setting found that these students were influenced by ingrained social and cultural norms that shaped their behavioural patterns or belief systems, fear of losing face in front of others, and lack of self-confidence in classroom settings. These findings indicated that both self-efficacy and sociocultural factors can be important influences on FLCA. Although Ohata's (2005) study was small-scale, it provides useful insights into the FLCA experiences of students who are studying abroad. A study by Woodrow (2006) of 275 international students studying in Australia found that EFL learners from Confucian Heritage Countries, namely, China, Korea and Japan were found to be more anxious language learners than other ethnic groups and indicated that sociocultural factors influence FLCA. However, there is an absence of comparative studies into FLCA experiences of foreign language learners in both a native language host country and the learner's respective home country.

The third research aim targeted the influence of foreign language anxiety on classroom oral performance and learning outcomes. Matsuda and Gobel's (2004) study focused on the influence of FLCA upon the oral performance of 252 Japanese undergraduate students majoring in English and found that self-confidence, student participation and language proficiency were key predictors of classroom performance. While Woodrow's (2006) study found there to be a significant negative relationship between anxiety from speaking a foreign language and oral performance and this resulted from having to perform in front of classmates and fear of losing face when speaking to the teacher in situations where there was a low level of linguistic predictability. Further studies have found that language anxiety can affect foreign language learners when performing oral tasks. For example, when foreign language learners perform oral tasks, language anxiety issues arise as a result of communication apprehension, social evaluation, and competition among learners (Cutrone, 2009; Hounsell & McCune, 2003). Furthermore, in a study by Bailey, Onwuegbuzie and Daley (2000) of 205 American college students enrolled in Spanish, French and German languages classroom-based courses confirmed the importance of the relationship between anxiety and self-perception, that is, perceived scholastic competence,

perceived self-worth and the expectation of foreign language achievement; and indicated that goal-centred theory, self-efficacy and motivation can be influential factors in FLCA.

Ethical Considerations

The main identified risk was the interview sessions with participants, however, other risks included: perceived or actual conflicts of interest; breaches of confidentiality, which could occur in the data collection and/or data analysis phases of research; and discomfort or distress to participants. Several control measures were implemented in order to reduce these risks. Although the researcher had taught the participants prior to commencement of this research, at the time of the research being conducted there was no influence from the researcher over the participants' progress or academic assessment of the participants at that time and nor would there be in the future. Each of the participants volunteered to engage in this research. Data collected was non-identifiable material and participants would only be recognized by way of the pseudonyms *Student A* and *Student B*. Data collected and analyzed for this study was available for the participants to verify and comment on prior to final inclusion in order to ensure that the participants' perceptions of the research observations were accurately represented. Furthermore, at anytime during the data collection, the participants were able to use the specific key expression - "No comment!" - to indicate their desire to avoid answering or commenting on a question or topic, etc. if they felt any distress or discomfort as a result of any communication during their interview.

Limitations

The number of only two participants being involved in this research lent itself to some obvious limitations. Among the research findings to be established, only general conclusions could be drawn and these could not be viewed as being representative of the experiences of a wider pool of Japanese foreign language learners. Yin (2003b) proffered that case study based approaches to research are not universally accepted by researchers as reliable, objective or legitimate due to the difficulty involved with research findings drawing generalizations from a specific case or a limited number of cases. However, the purpose of this research was to explore specific research aims that pertained to this research. These research aims focused on Japanese EFL learners. There was an absence of past studies that specifically investigated the research

aims henceforth to be investigated. Thus, the results of this research, although only obtained from a sampling range of two participants, offered exploratory research outcomes that could be utilized to further develop research findings in the future, in terms of the specific research aims that were were the focus of this study, see the Research Aims and Theoretical Foundations section for the aims.

Methodology

Research Design

This study was shaped by an interpretivist oriented philosophical perspective, and specifically the approach of symbolic interactionism. The interpretivist approach was employed to look for culturally and historically situated interpretations of the social world of the participants; while symbolic interactionism was utilized to interpret participants actions from their own perspectives (Gray, 2009). A multiple case-based and micro-ethnographic design was employed and the unit of analysis was individual participants (Creswell, 2008). The facilitation of a case study of two participants aimed to provide an in-depth exploration of the FLCA experienced that could be used in future larger-scale research. The implementation of a case study based approach to research is useful for adding to the understanding of and extending the experience of a particular research topic, that is to say in regard to this research, FLCA based experiences (Stake, 2005). Also, the facilitation of a micro-ethnographic design aimed to describe, analyze and interpret a specific culture-sharing group's shared patterns of behaviour and beliefs, that is, Japanese foreign language learners who have been educated in Japan and abroad at the tertiary level. This was to be performed through a small-scale study and over a short period of time, that is to say, via a micro-level ethnographic study (Gray, 2009).

The case study method utilized multiple sources of evidence for the reason that multiple sources of data could provide multiple measures of the same construct (Gray, 2009). The use of two individual interviews and two individual short written journal documents aimed to determine the accuracy or credibility of the findings through member checking (Creswell, 2008) and it involved the researcher asking both participants about the fairness and accuracy of representation in the final draft findings to be reported.

<u>Participants</u>

The participants were two Japanese adult females aged in their mid-20s, who had been close friends for more than five years. Selection of the participants was decided by means of criterion-based sampling (Creswell, 2008) and was based on the following criteria. The participants were required to be: Japanese natives, foreign language learners of English with experience of learning English in both secondary and tertiary education settings in Japan; and who had studied and completed undergraduate degree programs in an English speaking country.

<u>Data Sources</u>

This study utilized an in-depth qualitative interview format by way of 1 one-hour semi-structured interview in English, separately undertaken by each participant. Additionally, a short written journal was completed by each of the participants before their interview for the purpose of generating more focused questions during each interview. See Table 1 for the data collection instruments and the time frame of their use in this study.

Table 1: Data Collection Instruments

Instrument	Collection period	Details
1. Reflective Written Journal	prior to interviews	*both *Student A* & *Student B* involved
2. Interview (Student A)	Day 1	*only *Student A* participates
3. Interview (Student B)	Day 2	*only *Student B* participates

<u>Reflective Written Journal</u>

The first data collection instrument used was a personal document. The participants were requested to write one A4 page length reflective journal that represented a personal document. The journal was to be handed to the researcher one day before the interview of each participant took place. This type of document can be a good source for text, that is, word data for this research (Creswell, 2008). The objective of the journal document was explained to the participants carefully so that they understood the meaning of feelings and critical events, see Appendix A for details about instruction details requested for this document. The one page journal was written and submitted prior to the first interview for the purpose of providing an insight into the language and words used by the participants when they framed their thoughts about FLCA and they were used for the development of interview questions for both the first and second interview and with the aim of stimulating thoughts among the participants about this research topic before engaging in the interviews. Another advantage of using this type of private document in qualitative research is that the data given in such documents is ready for analysis without the necessary transcription that can be required for interview data (Creswell, 2008). Permission was successfully sought from the participants for their journal documents to be analyzed in this research and to be included in the final findings.

One possible limitation of using private documents was the issue of the value of the data included in the document (Creswell, 2008). Appendix A shows the wording given to the participants and of particular importance are the key phrase *critical events* in the request to: *Please write about any feelings or critical events that you have had of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and provide me with this journal before the 1st interview session begins.* A critical event refers to an episode in the life of a person which represents an influential or dramatic incident in a research participant's life. In this case, the participants chose to use a narrative form of written communication, that is, the telling of a personal account of experience, in their reflective journal which was expected to strengthen validity through meaningful analysis and reliability through the trustworthiness of participants' documented notes (Webster and Mertova, 2007). The use of a narrative framework supported the development of information about critical events that the participants might want to communicate in their journal. Hence, narrative inquiry can be a powerful educational research tool.

<u>Interviews</u>

Two semi-structured, formal one-hour interviews were chosen for this study for the purpose of learning how people actually behave in a particular situation by way of an investigation of self-reported behaviour, beliefs and perceptions (Yin, 2010). Each participant engaged separately in a one-hour interview for the purpose of multiple sources of evidence in this small-scale study. Additionally, participants were interviewed separately for the purpose of balancing against any developments during the interviews where the participants might have faced the position of feeling uncomfortable to voice their opinions openly to the interviewer in front of another participant or where the participant might have faced the position that they held an opinion that was different to that given by another participant (Creswell, 2008). While set questions were established prior to each of the interview sessions, see Appendix B, flexibility existed in semi-structured interviews for new questions to be introduced during the interview so that interview questions could be orientated to the interview context or situation and to the participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). One limitation of using interviews as a data collection technique is that although self-reported behaviour can provide important insights into what or how the participants are thinking, nevertheless, these reports may not represent completely accurate accounts of the actual behaviour as it occurred in real-life. Open-ended questions are an important part of semi-structured interviews with the aim of this data collection source being to obtain responses from the participants who are using their own words, rather than words pre-defined by the researcher or past findings (Yin, 2010). Additionally, the interview conversations were audio-taped for the purpose of providing an accurate record of the conversations and that information was transcribed into words for analysis. Finally, probes were used flexibly to elicit more information during the interviews. However, they were not set or structured prior to the interviews taking place. Probes were used as the need arose when limited information given by participants required further elaboration.

Results and discussion

Analysis

Analysis of the data obtained during the data collection phase of this resrach was achieved through the use of themes in order to organize and more deeply understand the participants' individual experiences (Creswell, 2008). Four themes were identified from the written journals and interview transcriptions from the two participants after the data was analyzed, namely: motivation; learner self-belief; achievement; and situational experiences.

Results

Pertaining to the three research aims of this study, significant findings are discussed in this section. The first aim was to explore FLCA experiences of two Japanese students from their educational life cycle of secondary education to tertiary education. **Student A** wrote a brief story experience about a critical event that happened in one of her classes in her second year of junior-high school. At the end of the last class of the year, her Japanese English teacher presented her and two other students with new Japanese-English/English-Japanese dictionaries. It was the first and only time that she felt that she had received special encouragement during her years of studying English, starting from junior-high school and continuing through to her post-tertiary studies of English. **Student A** indicated that this experience motivated her to *"want to study English language more and find the meanings of words and try harder in class."* Additionally, **Student A** remarked that she was a member of an English speaking club all through her school life from the beginning of junior-high school through high school and until the end of her university studies in Japan. She said that *"not all Japanese students are able to join an English speaking club at school, it depends on the availability of that club existing or not."* The important point of attending an English speaking club for many years is that she lost her *"fear of speaking in front of her teacher and peers and gained a lot of confidence from speaking practice opportunities."* While **Student B** said that the teachers talked a lot in her junior-high and high school classes and students didn't have many opportunities to speak in class. However, she was very surprised that at university she was expected to speak English in her classes and was *"very happy but sometimes very nervous about this"* and yet she recognized that this was an important part of her development in speaking English. **Student A** indicated through her comments that her

experiences of anxiety from studying a foreign language in a classroom setting were reduced through the support of one of her teachers and her inclusion in an English speaking club which motivated her to learn and increased her self-efficacy. The experience of *Student A* receiving an English dictionary and the desire for her to learn more English as a result of this kind action from her teacher indicated tha extrinsic motivation (Maslow, 1943) can play an influential role in driving an ESL learner to participate and find satisfaction in their learning experience. *Student B* indicated through her comments that she was influenced by motivation (Maslow, 1943) and increased self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) in dealing with anxiety in her foreign language classroom settings.

The second aim was to explore and compare the similarities and differences of FLCA experiences of two Japanese students at a tertiary level of education in both a domestic setting, that is, Japan and an international setting, that is, the United States of America. In the reflective written journal document provided by *Student B*, an account was given about her experiences as a university student in Japan and the U.S.A. She said that she is not shy and tries to talk in class, as much as other motivated students and she usually waits for the teacher to ask the class group of students for their answers and opinions because this is the usual manner in classes in Japan. At first she felt unsure about when she should talk during her class time at an American university. But she quickly changed when she was clear about the teacher's classroom expectations. Then, she felt able to try to talk more in class. Both, *Students' A and B* stated a similar belief that they were expected to talk more in their American university language classes than in their Japanese university language classes. Additionally, each participant commented on a feeling of freedom to express themselves in their American university English classes because there were students from different countries in the classes, many students showed excitement in their new foreign learning environment and they both wanted to be accepted members in their class groups because their fellow students were there only friends in this new environment. This view was held by both participants and it indicates the influence of goal-centred theory (Dreikurs, 1972) because the participants interacted in class group situations wanted to belong to their class group, be accepted by their peers and perform in class as other class members did, that is, actively. Evidence of the influence of sociocultural factors (Vygotsky, 1962) is indicated in comparative comments made by both students in relation to the sense of freedom of expression they felt in their foreign classroom settings. However, in analyzing this particular observation from the participants' perspective it is important to note that the participants have each only

attended one university in Japan and in the USA. Yet, they have had several different teachers during their study of English in courses at those institutions.

The third aim was to investigate ways in which FLCA may influence learning outcomes and oral performance through the experiences of two Japanese learners. The investigation of this aim showed that anxiety in foreign language classroom learning experiences can be linked with oral performance. **Student A** said that she felt *"nervous with a new class group every time but as time went by that feeling goes away; speaking becomes easier and speaking becomes a fun part of class time."* Furthermore, **Student B** said, *"speaking in class nowadays is interesting for me and I am not afraid to do a presentation if I have time to prepare before."* She also stated that *"in the past when I felt worried about speaking English in class, I always got a bad oral performance grade so I had to overcome that worry to do better and learn more in class and I did this by speaking more in class."* **Student B** also commented on the increased feeling of motivation she felt when all participants actively talked in class, saying that *"…when other students try to talk in class, I feel more relaxed and I also want to speaking and listen more to what is happening in class. When the class mood is quiet then I sometimes wish I could escape the room, I don't want to speak too much more than other students. I just don't want to study at that time."* From the comments made here by **Student A**, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) appears to be a driving force behind her behaviour. **Student B's** comments indicate that there are motivation-based (Maslow, 1943) and self-efficacy-based (Bandura, 1977) influences at play in her foreign language classroom learning experiences.

<u>Limitations of the Results</u>

While observations and comments provided by the participants offer constructive points of reference for further exploration into the aims outlined in this research, the results cannot be viewed as generally representative of the experiences or opinions of Japanese learners of EFL because a wider sample of participants is required in order to demonstrate such a level of representation. Yet, there was no indication of greatly contrary evidence among the data collected and analyzed from the participants' responses. The implementation of individual interviews and written journal documents for this study combined to enhance the validity of the findings despite the small sample size. These data collection instruments were effective in their objective of eliciting insightful responses from the participants. Member checking was

implemented to enhance accuracy of the results. Internal validitywas limited in this study by the absence of the researcher being able to observe the event of either participants experiencing FLCA at any stage of this study, while making inferences about the data. However, the researcher had observed both participants in an EFL classroom environment prior to this study, during classes taught. External validity was limited due to the issue of whether any findings could be generalized (Gray, 2009) beyond the study and whether conclusions of a general nature about Japanese EFL learners and their experiences of FLCA could be drawn.

Recommendations

Participant responses explicitly revealed particular opinions on experiences of anxiety in foreign language classroom teaching and learning environments. The participants were inclined to comment about things carefully, often without rigorous critiquing of their experiences with their Japanese or foreign native English language teachers or their classroom learning environments. Hence, the results of this research may have been tempered by local influences of group harmony and the absence of open criticism and should be viewed in this context. Experiences of FLCA in secondary education were evidenced in the findings of this research. However, further research into the experiences of foreign language learning anxiety from the beginning of institutional learning in primary or secondary schooling and how these anxieties evolve or dissipate over time through to tertiary education-based experiences of foreign language anxiety could be beneficial to the field of FLCA. Additionally, research into cross-cultural comparative experiences of FLCA based tertiary settings could be furthered as the results indicated in this research revealed the existence of differences in the ways that learners perceive their experience of anxieties in these settings. Finally, further study into the research aims established in this study but on a larger scale could be beneficial so that greater representation and accuracy can be achieved.

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Appendixes

Appendix A: Written Reflective Journal Instrument

Please write about any feelings or critical events that you have had of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and provide me with this journal before the 1st interview session begins.

Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview for each Participant, that is, Student A and Student B

1. How do you perceive yourself as a learner of English?

2. Can you share your thoughts about how you feel when you speak English in class?

3. In what ways has this feeling changed over time from the beginning of Junior high school, through to High school, your tertiary studies and overseas studies?

4. Can you share your thoughts about any similarities or differences experienced in studying English in university classes in Japan and the U.S.A.?

5. Can you share your thoughts on studying English with other Japanese learners in the classroom?