

# Teachers' Strategies for Decreasing Students' Anxiety Levels to Improve Their Communicative Skills

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## Abstract

Students' high levels of foreign-language classroom anxiety (FLCA) are reported to have a negative impact on their target language performance in classrooms. There are some anxiety studies from the students' perspective in the existing literature, but few from the teachers' perspective, particularly in Japan. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate how teachers managed students' levels of anxiety, which may lead to an improvement in their communication skills. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with six teachers. Various strategies that teachers could use to decrease students' levels of anxiety were introduced. In communicative lessons, students need to practice speaking and listening in class as much as possible to improve these skills in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context. Therefore, teachers should use various methods to increase the opportunities for students to speak a target language in class, and to create an unthreatening classroom environment in which students can speak without hesitation. In addition, teachers could use group dynamics effectively to ensure seamless classroom management.

**Keywords:** foreign language classroom anxiety, improving communication skills, interview with teachers, college students, communicative English lessons

## 1. Introduction

The teaching of English in Japan has gradually shifted to include communicative methods in communicative EFL college lessons. This approach encourages students to participate actively in the lessons, and contributes to improving their speaking and listening skills. In such lessons, performances are observed and they become concerned about their performances when they compare themselves to their classmates (Kitano, 2001). Some researchers have focused on decreasing anxiety in foreign-language classrooms because the students' performances will deteriorate if their levels of anxiety are high (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Therefore, teachers may need to consider the students' feelings of anxiety in order to create a classroom atmosphere in which students will communicate actively in English with their classmates, and thus improve their communicative abilities. In the present study, individual interviews with six teachers were conducted, and the findings of the research and suggestions for decreasing students' levels of anxiety are presented in this paper.

## 2. Literature Review

Due to the globalization of society, the teaching of English in Japan has gradually shifted from the grammar translation method to the inclusion of communicative methods (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). In order to augment exposure to the target language (TL), many Japanese universities have adopted an English-only rule in communicative English classes at universities, which is one cause of students' anxiety in foreign-language classrooms (FLCA; Rivers, 2011). If teachers continue to use the TL-only approach for materials deemed difficult, the students will not be able to understand the content of the class, and their anxiety levels will increase as they will consider the classes to exceed their abilities (Rivers, 2011). In fact, students with low levels of

anxiety have been found to have high achievements in the TL (Botes, Dewaele, & Greiff, 2020; Dordinejad & Ahmadabad, 2014). Therefore, some researchers (Bailey, 1983; Zhang, 2019) have focused on decreasing the levels of students' anxiety. Potential sources of anxiety are presentations to the entire class, error corrections, low self-confidence, less motivation, peer pressure, students' beliefs about language learning, teachers' beliefs about language teaching, teacher-student interactions, teaching techniques in class, fear of language testing, previous negative experiences with classmates, and the mismatched level of the teaching materials to the level of the students' TL proficiency (Bailey, 1983; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Piniel & Csizer, 2013; Young, 1991).

There does not appear to be a simple solution for decreasing students' anxiety. Shao, Yu and Ji (2013) stated that teachers could decrease their students' levels of anxiety when the teachers' emotional intelligence was high and they considered their students' needs. The teachers' concern for their students is important. Students suffering from anxiety should be taught that mistakes are allowed, that making mistakes is part of the language-learning process (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002), and that keeping a conversation going is preferable to falling silent due to the fear of making mistakes (Harumi, 2011; King, 2013). Teachers cannot choose classroom activities, teaching techniques, or methods without considering the students' interests, reactions, feelings, and the learning styles of individual students (Horwitz, 2000). Thus, teachers should identify the contributing sources and causes of anxiety by attempting to adopt the students' perspective. In addition, teachers should foster meta-linguistic awareness and group cohesion to create a less tense learning environment (Davila, 2019).

Moreover, Zhang (2019) considered anxiety to be associated with students' performances, self-confidence, and motivation. Decreasing students' levels of anxiety may be effective in terms of increasing their motivation to learn a language (Yan & Horwitz, 2008). With regard to the effect of self-confidence, van Batenburg et al. (2019) reported that students' achievements in EFL oral interactions could be predicted by the increase in their self-confidence under strategically directed instruction. Activities in pairs/small groups and personal discussions/self-talk were found to make most students feel comfortable (Koch & Terrell, 1991), and story-telling activities in group work increased the students' motivation and self-confidence (Ahlquist, 2019). In order to decrease students' levels of anxiety and to improve their communicative TL skills, teachers should encourage them to have higher levels of self-confidence, to maintain their motivation and interest in studying English, and should provide opportunities for students to use the TL frequently (Carless, 2008; Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008; Liu & Jackson, 2008).

Although research on anxiety in second language acquisition (SLA) has mainly investigated anxiety from the students' perspective, few studies have focused on the way(s) teachers can decrease students' levels of anxiety in Japanese EFL communicative lessons. Therefore, to change the perspective, the present study posed the following research question:

- 1) How do teachers identify their own perceptions of students' levels of anxiety and manage them in communicative EFL classrooms?

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Interview Participants*

With regard to the method used to recruit teachers to participate in the interview, the researcher in this study approached prior co-workers who may have been willing to assist in the research. The requirement was that the class(es) were essentially taught in English. In total, six teachers responded to this interview survey. Their demographic information is presented in Table 1. As supplementary information, the English programs, particularly the communicative English classes at the college, employed an English-only rule with which the teachers were required to comply. Although the instructors and learners accepted that the use of the Japanese language should be avoided, some of the instructors used Japanese legitimately when the students failed to grasp the content of the lessons. As each of the teachers selected the textbook(s) to use in his or her class(es) at his or her discretion, the textbook(s) used by the teachers differed. The teachers were interviewed to elicit suggestions for decreasing the students' levels of anxiety.

Table 1. Description of the Teachers Participating in the Interviews

	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
Age	in the 30s	in the 40s	in the 40s	in the 50s	in the 40s	in the 60s
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male
Nationality	Japanese	Japanese	Japanese	Japanese	Japanese	American
Teaching experience	13 years	12 years	15 years	16 years	12 years	40 years
Degree	PhD	Pursuing PhD	MA	Holding PhD credits	MA	PhD
Work sectors	Dpt. English	Dpt. IBERO American	Dpt. CSK	Dpt. English	Dpt. CSK	Dpt. English
Status	Associate professor	Lecturer	Part time lecturer	Professor	Lecturer	Professor
Number of class(es)	1	3	1	2	1	1
Class type	TOEFL preparation	1 Media English, 2 Reading	Listening	2 Speaking	Reading	Speaking
Students in charge	English major	L3 major	L3 major	English major	L3 major	Mostly English major
	Advanced	Advanced	Intermediate	Intermediate	Intermediate	All levels
	Freshman	1 Freshman, 2 Sophomore	Junior & Senior	1 Freshman, 1 Junior	Junior & Senior	All graders
	Optional class	Required class	Required class	Required class	Required class	Optional class
Use of language	English/ Japanese if necessary	English only	English/ Japanese	English only	English/ Japanese	English only
Classroom strictness	Neutral	Neutral	Mild	Neutral	Mild	Mild
Fear of making mistakes	No	Yes, but sometimes No	No	Yes, but sometimes No	No	No

*Note.* IBERO American (Portuguese, Indonesian, Thai, or Vietnamese major); CSK (Chinese, Spanish, or Korean major); Teacher 2's classes were a sophomore media English class, a freshman reading class, and a sophomore reading class. Teacher 4's classes were a freshman speaking class and a junior speaking class.

### 3.2 Interviews

The semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with six teachers based on their schedules, and took place in their offices or at a quiet place on campus. The interviews lasted for 30 to 60 minutes. The interview questions were:

- 1) What kind of lessons do you implement to decrease students' levels of anxiety?
- 2) How do you manage students with high levels of anxiety?
- 3) How do you make use of group dynamics in English classes with communicative activities in order to decrease students' levels of anxiety?

The data from the interviews were first transcribed, then translated into English (except one), and coded to make the data anonymous and to prepare for the creation of categories. Coding categories were based on the factors of anxiety identified by previous researchers, such as creating a risk-free atmosphere (including decreasing levels of stress; Shao, Yu & Ji, 2013), increasing opportunities for speaking practice (Dewaele & Al-Saraj, 2015), including more pair/group work (Crawford, McDonough, & Brun-Merser, 2019), and using group dynamics (Murphey, Falout, Fukuda, & Fukada, 2014). Patterns and relationships in the interview data were then analyzed.

## 4. Results

The teachers' suggestions for decreasing the students' levels of anxiety included creating risk-free classrooms (including decreasing the levels of stress), increasing opportunities for speaking practice (including more pair/group work), and ways of using classroom dynamics. The italicized sentences are key excerpts (quotes from the interviewees translated by the researcher; however, the native-English speaker's statements were not

translated) that were used to demonstrate ways of decreasing the students' levels of anxiety (see Table 2).

Table 2. The Result of the Interviews

	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
Create an unthreatening environment		<i>Lower the level and the amount of the lesson content, use easy words and simple grammar with slower speed, deliver handouts that summarize the content of the lesson.</i>	<i>Do not be shamed when making mistakes.</i>			<i>Increase routine work and make students repeat the same exercise.</i>
		<i>Ask all students to share their anxiety in class at the first class.</i>	<i>The students who do not want to speak English in class may have a problem with personal relationship with classmates and are afraid of being looked down on or making themselves ridiculous.</i>			
		<i>Create a system to rescue highly anxious students who cannot speak English fluently and fail to keep up with other classmates.</i>				
Practicing Speaking English	<i>Practice speaking English by self-talk or with friends.</i>	<i>Increase self-confidence through steadily accumulated speaking experience.</i>		<i>Teach students useful expressions, how to rephrase and how to define difficult words in simple English.</i>		<i>Make students do self-talk, shadowing, improvisation, and speech dictation such as memorizing songs or proverbs.</i>
	<i>Teach students some conversational strategies: 1) ask classmates "How do you say this in English?"; 2) use simple English; 3) consult a bilingual dictionary; 4) use Japanese as</i>		<i>Teach students useful expressions, how to rephrase and how to define difficult words in simple English.</i>	<i>Make scaffoldings for students to acquire the ability to say what they want to say in their own words.</i>		<i>Avoid keeping silent for fear of making mistakes.</i>

*the last resort.*

*Write common mistakes on a blackboard and share them.*

*Share serious errors by writing the correct words, expressions, or pronunciations on the blackboard.*

*Consider the flow of the class, how to lead classes, or the activities everyone can join without hesitating to speak English.*

*Decrease the amount of words in a report so that students' anxiety becomes facilitative.*

*Speaking practice with pairs: speak about any topics students like, can make any mistakes, ok just to say only words.*

*Give favorite topics for students to discuss.*

*Increase students' self-confidence by having a good self-image.*

*Propose the importance of scaffoldings.*

*Do not care about the quality of students' English when classmates listen to the story with zest.*

*Get compliments from teachers and classmates.*

*Giving students compliments.*

Increase pair/group work

*Increase pair/group work instead of pointing out students one by one in a whole class.*

*Several groups should make presentations at the same time in class.*

*For pair work, train students how to be a good partner. e.g. Advanced-level students should help basic-level students by using words different from those just used.*

*Construct an intimate relationship each other.*

Group dynamics

*Group dynamics are critical as conversations cannot be established among only basic-level students.*

*Establish a constructive relationship among classmates.*

*Take a picture of a class, give students a copy of it, make them introduce each other as an ice-breaking activity, change a partner in every lesson, and encourage students to make*

	<i>Help basic-level counterparts by rewording or rephrasing.</i>	<i>more friends. Instill the idea of collaborative autonomy "I respect you, so please criticize me. I learn more and expand my thoughts by sharing ideas with others" for creating a richer environment.</i>
	<i>Take care of the class atmosphere, students' characteristics, a personal relationship with other classmates, or gender difference.</i>	

## 5. Discussion

Based on the literature reviews, lower levels of anxiety might be a key factor in improving students' communicative TL skills (Dordinejad & Ahmadabad, 2014). Accordingly, EFL teachers were interviewed in this study. The interview results revealed some practical ideas for decreasing students' levels of anxiety and promoting an effective language-learning environment.

### 5.1 Create an Unthreatening Environment

The interview survey revealed the importance of creating a relaxed environment. The balance between a challenge and anxiety is very important, and students become anxious when the challenge is too great. Increased routine work is effective for solving this problem (Chaudron, 1988), and students should repeat the same exercise several times because they will then be able to understand what they should do in class after several lessons. It is also important for teachers to ensure that the content, progress, and quality of the class is appropriate for the level of the students, and to devise ways to make it easier for them to understand the content when teaching. This was supported by Bai, Chao, and Wang (2019), who said that the teachers' role is vital in increasing students' self-efficacy. Similarly, Al-Murtadha (2019) proposed that visualization and goal-setting activities could increase students' motivation to communicate with others. With regard to homework, an effective method to decrease the students' levels of anxiety and enable them to complete their homework easily is to reduce the number of words in a report.

Teachers should consider seamless class management, and devise activities in which all students can participate. In the first classroom session, teachers could discuss students' feelings of anxiety with the entire class and create a system to assist anxious students. This is in line with King (2013), who proposed that students who were not proficient in speaking should be protected by teaching them how to avoid silence. Moreover, Liu and Jackson (2008) stated that relationships with classmates were important because students can speak English freely when classroom intimacy is increased. This idea is similar to Victoria's (2019) opinion that teachers should consider how to address students' anxiety to build rapport among classmates. Students who are reluctant to speak may not yet have established good relationships with their pair/group work members, or they may be afraid of being evaluated negatively. This is in line with Young's (1990) report, which found that students feared making mistakes, losing face, and being evaluated negatively by teachers and classmates.

### 5.2 Practicing Speaking English

As practice is essential for improving speaking skills, students need to speak English via self-talk or with friends. Simultaneous presentations by several groups in the class is another excellent way to decrease students' levels of anxiety and increase the amount of speaking practice in English, which echoes Shachter's (2018) idea. In addition, shadowing and improvisation are vital for improving pronunciation, and speech dictation is good practice for constructing longer sentences and enhancing the students' abilities. Practicing speaking without

focusing on making mistakes is crucial. Students should not be concerned about making minor mistakes as long as they can understand each other. Students' mistakes should be allowed as long as they are trying their best, as making mistakes is an inevitable occurrence in the process of practicing English. If students have more opportunities to speak English and receive input from others' talk, their speaking ability will gradually improve. In lessons, teachers need to suggest some conversational strategies that students can use when they forget the correct expression, write the mistakes that students make frequently or serious errors on a blackboard, and share these mistakes with the entire class. Giving students scaffolding is important (Chaudron, 1988), as the purpose is for students to acquire the ability to say what they want to say in their own words.

Most students underestimate their speaking ability in English because they lack speaking practice. It is reasonable to assume that they will not feel self-confident about an experience they have not had. Therefore, students need to increase their self-confidence through speaking practice, as suggested by Piniel and Csizer (2013). Speakers tend to be less overly conscious of their audience when they have strong motivation to convey their story to their classmates. On the other hand, Jordan and Gray (2019) and Najeeb (2013) stated that instructors should identify various ways of creating a comfortable, student-centered atmosphere in order to nurture their students' autonomy and motivation. Teachers need to be lenient when encouraging students to practice speaking English, and make them aware that they can communicate with classmates in English, which will lead to the students having good self-images and will increase their self-confidence. With regard to other ways to increase students' self-confidence, simple topics and materials are necessary to ensure that the students have successful experiences (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). Compliments from teachers and classmates are also effective (Dweck, 1999). As a last resort, students need to be allowed to use their L1 in order to join activities and discuss issues in depth (Ahmad & Jusoff, 2009; Carson & Kashihara, 2012).

Most of the activities should be done as pair work in order to increase speaking opportunities. This is in line with Carless' (2008) view; the author stated that, as EFL students do not have sufficient opportunities to practice speaking in English, they need to be provided with such opportunities. Most importantly, teachers should teach students to be ideal partners during pair work. Students should take responsibility for their behavior as class members, develop a friendly relationship with classmates, consider what they can do to establish a pleasant atmosphere in class, and make an effort to do so. Furthermore, students should be independent and take ownership of their study of English, and understand what they need to do by themselves in order to learn.

### *5.3 Group Dynamics*

Group dynamics are critical because, if the class consists only of students at the basic level, the conversation approach will not work. This means that diversity (mixed-level classes) can make a difference, as students can learn from one other. Students need to be more helpful to each other and provide resources by using a reciprocal exchange of ideas to increase a lasting, group-framed motivation (Murphey, Falout, Fukuda, & Fukuda, 2014). This is in line with the report by Thomas and Rose (2019), which found that language learning involved a transformative process in which other learners may play important roles. Chen (2019) and Crawford, McDonough, and Brun-Merser (2019) also stated that peer interaction was beneficial for language learning.

When paired with basic-level students, advanced-level students are encouraged to act as student-teachers to create a harmonious relationship, as this will enable them to improve their teaching skills. On the other hand, basic-level students need to work harder because they may feel anxious and lose self-confidence when they feel they cannot communicate. They should record each lesson, listen to it at home, engage in self-talk, and review the lesson to catch up with their peers (Young, 1991). The levels of students' anxiety may change depending on many variables, such as the classroom environment, students' individual differences, intimacy with other classmates, or gender differences. Thus, teachers should use a variety of methods to activate group dynamics to allow classmates to get to know each other, and to nurture collaborative autonomy in the classroom.

## **6. Limitations**

With regard to the limitations of this study, the use of a small sample (six teachers) means that the findings may not be generalizable. The limitation may explain the differences between the results of this study and those of some of the others in the literature. Thus, further research could involve increasing the number of teachers to be interviewed, and could include several universities that offer communication classes in English instead of only one. Performing replication studies in other EFL classrooms in Japan or other countries is also suggested.

## **7. Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to examine the actions that teachers were implementing to decrease students' levels of anxiety and to create a less anxious classroom environment during student-centered communicative university

lessons in Japan. Six teachers participated in the semi-structured individual interviews. The suggestions based on the results of the survey could be effective for decreasing students' levels of anxiety and creating a better relationship between teachers and students. It may be important to ensure that students have a successful experience, to encourage students to be independent learners and take ownership of their learning, and to persuade students that making an effort is more praiseworthy than is being accomplished from the beginning. It is hoped that teachers can ultimately assist students to improve their TL communicative skills by following these suggestions.

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