

# What Factors Are Associated with College Students' Anxiety in Communicative English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Classes in Japan?

Takako Inada

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The purpose of this study was to investigate what factors were closely related to foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) among Japanese EFL college students in their communicative English classes.

**Methods:** A questionnaire was administered to 252 students. It included the five-point Likert scale questionnaire about FLCA (five items) and risk taking (six items), the three-point Likert scale questionnaire about self-confidence, motivation, hours of self-study, years at college, major, and class-type.

**Results:** The multiple regression analysis of the questionnaire revealed that lower levels of anxiety were predicted by higher levels of self-confidence, risk-taking, and higher percentages of motivation, and longer self-study hours.

**Conclusion:** If students will be more confident, take more risks in class, study English on their own for more hours, and have stronger motivation, their anxiety may be low.

## KEY WORDS

anxiety, risk-taking, self-confidence, motivation, self-study hours

## INTRODUCTION

Botes, Dewaele, and Greiff (2020) suggested that anxiety adversely affects language development and that lower levels of anxiety improve student performance. Zhang (2019) also considers performance to be the most important result of language learning, so it is vital to understand the relationship between student emotions, especially anxiety and performance, in second language acquisition (SLA). Therefore, it is not advisable to underestimate the impact of anxiety reactions on SLA, and teachers should place appropriate emphasis on decreasing feeling of anxiety (Horwitz, 2000).

## BACKGROUND

Japanese EFL education is becoming increasingly communication-based than was the case previously when students were taught using only the Grammar Translation method, and currently includes both listening and speaking skills in English, as well as grammar and reading (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). Despite having had more than six years of compulsory English instruction, most Japanese students are unable to engage in basic-level English communication (Wicking, 2016). To improve students' communicative ability in English, many Japanese universities adopt an English-only rule, which could be one of the reasons for their anxiety (Rivers, 2011).

Previous literature has discussed the following factors as potential causes of anxiety. Sources of FLCA are inter-linked, and may be partly the result of ill-advised classroom practices (Young, 1991). For example, teacher-centred instruction or whole-class lessons are considered to be amongst the reasons that students are unwilling to speak in the TL

(Gregersen, MacIntyre, & Meza, 2014). In a challenging FL classes, the major cause of anxiety is giving oral presentations (Gregersen *et al.*, 2014). The classroom can be a source of humiliation, fear and shame, and students are aware of the discrepancy between effort and results because FL classes are more demanding and more difficult than are other classes (Price, 1991). Moreover, time pressure, improvised speaking practice, and teachers inconsiderate attitudes towards students were highlighted as sources of anxiety (Gregersen *et al.*, 2014). It is often mentioned that peer pressure (Young, 1990 & 1991) and comparison with peers (Yan & Horwitz, 2008) can lead to students experiencing anxiety. The fear of having errors corrected (Young, 1990), being evaluated negatively (Liu & Jackson, 2008), and hyper-sensitivity to being judged (King, 2013) were also amongst the sources of anxiety.

Ely (1986) stated that Language Class Risk-taking (that is, learners' willingness to take the risk of using the TL in L2 classes) is a strong predictor of class participation and Language Class Anxiety is a significant and negative predictor of risk taking in language classes. Risk-taking could be closely linked to self-confidence and motivation because confident and motivated students usually take more risks in class. In fact, it is often said that low motivation and self-confidence are regarded as the sources of anxiety (Liu & Jackson, 2008). The interrelationship between anxiety and motivation could be a strong predictor of successful language learning because these factors are linked closely to learners goals, expectations and learning strategies (Yan & Horwitz, 2008). This means that low motivation may have serious, negative effects on students' language learning. Moreover, high self-confidence is considered to be important to reduce anxiety. Both frequency of language use and a higher level of self-confidence are linked significantly to lower levels of anxiety (Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008).

According to some proposals for decreasing anxiety mentioned in the previous literature, various points should be considered as there seems to be no simple solution for alleviating students' anxiety.

Received on March 18, 2021 and accepted on May 6, 2021

Department of Health Sciences, Japan University of Health Sciences  
1961-2 Sate, Sate-shi, Saitama 340-0113, Japan

Corresponding author: Takako Inada  
(e-mail: takako.inada@gmail.com)

**Table 1: The Result of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis**

Model	B	Std. Error	Unstandardized		Standardized		95.0% Confidence		
			Coefficients		Coefficients		Interval for B		
			B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	28.887	1.547			18.679	.000	25.841	31.933
	risk-taking	-.420	.058	-.400	-7.229	.000	-.534	-.305	
	motivation	-.028	.011	-.149	-2.493	.013	-.050	-.006	
	hours of self-study	-.118	.042	-.165	-2.805	.005	-.202	-.035	
	self-confidence	-1.468	.392	-.203	-3.744	.000	-2.240	-.696	
	year at college	-.215	.224	-.055	-.957	.339	-.657	.227	
	major	.576	.400	.128	1.438	.152	-.213	1.364	
	class-type	1.223	.646	.162	1.892	.060	-.050	2.496	

a. Dependent Variable: anxiety

Researchers should identify factors and sources of anxiety by attempting to see things from the students' perspectives; these factors can then be included in the teachers' decision-making processes (Price, 1991). The implication is that teachers cannot select activities, teaching methods or techniques without considering the interests, affective reactions, and individual learning styles of their students (Koch & Terrell, 1991). Moreover, it is important to regard the classroom as a place for communicating and learning rather than as a place for performance (Price, 1991). This is in line with Young (1990), who suggested that pair/group work would help to decrease anxiety based on her findings that 'students' fear of speaking in front of others, anxiety over making mistakes in front of their peers and instructors, and willingness to participate in activities that do not require them to be spotlighted, could be related to low self-esteem' (p. 550).

Actually, many students fear being evaluated negatively; however, Young (1990) explained that students also believed their errors should be corrected, and indicated that how, how often, and when teachers corrected students' errors appeared to be important. Furthermore, students need to practice speaking the TL in order to increase their self-confidence about speaking in class (Carless, 2008) and to decrease their anxiety (Levine, 2003), and then practice self-talk (the act or practice of talking to oneself, either aloud or silently), as this is a particularly useful exercise for increasing motivation (Young, 1990). In addition, teachers should pay attention to reticent students and encourage them to interact in group/pair activities in a non-threatening environment, as they need to practice speaking English to improve their proficiency (Liu & Jackson, 2008). The findings of the scientific approach by Gregersen *et al.* (2014) support such proposals as increasing pair/group work, transferring from debilitating to facilitating anxiety and giving students an immediate escape route, in addition to new concepts such as providing students with improvised speaking practice instead of requiring them to memorise scripts.

Various literature reviews have stated that decreasing students' levels of anxiety could improve their performance and produce good results in language learning. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate what factors are related to students' anxiety in communicative classrooms. To this end, the research question is what factors are associated with the anxiety experienced by Japanese college students in communicative EFL lessons?

## SUBJECTS AND METHODS

### Characteristics of the Questionnaire Participants

The questionnaire was administered in communicative English classes to a total of 252 EFL students at a Japanese university (63 males and 189 females). The female students outnumbered their male peers by a ratio of three to one. This reflected the male to female ratio of the university's population as a whole, which was about 2880 in total. There are about 720 students in each grade: approximately 450 students major in English, about 120 in Spanish and Portuguese, and around 150 in Asian languages. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 24 years (median age 19 years, accounting for 86 students). There were 105 freshmen, 68 sophomores, 62 juniors and 17 seniors. The participants

were racially homogeneous; all of them had been raised in Japan and their L1 was Japanese. Participants majoring in languages other than English were also required to study English as the second language (L2). The 108 participants who had begun to study a third language (L3) for their majors (other than L2 English) after entering the university included 47 people who were studying Spanish or Portuguese, and 61 who were studying Asian languages such as Chinese, Korean, Thai, Indonesian and Vietnamese. One hundred and twenty-nine students were attending required English classes taught by bilingual, native Japanese-speaking teachers, and 123 students were attending an optional English class taught by a native English-speaking teacher or a Test of EFL (TOEFL) preparation class taught by bilingual, native Japanese-speaking teachers. The university's syllabus places strong emphasis on oral communication, and the students were often given the opportunity to practice speaking English in class. The participants' hours of English self-study outside of the classroom (mainly at home) ranged from 0 to 30 hours (median 3) per week, and included grammar, reading, listening and/or writing (including e-mail correspondence and social networking/chat activities). The students were asked to self-assess their levels of motivation to learn English using a numeric scale, on which 100% was regarded as the highest and 0% the lowest, with the range being between 20-100% (median 70). With regard to the self-assessed levels of English proficiency (self-confidence: beginner, intermediate or advanced, measured using a three-point Likert scale), the results revealed that 99 students (39%) considered themselves to be at a basic level, 148 students (59%) at an intermediate level, and five students (2%) at an advanced level.

### Questionnaire and Data Analysis

In the statistical analyses, the data from the 252 students were included. The students were asked to complete the questionnaire in class in order to maximize the response rate, and about 10 minutes of class time was allocated to complete the questionnaire. The five-point Likert scale questionnaire in this research included the questions about FLCA (five items) and risk-taking (six items) used by Saito and Samimy (1996). Saito and Samimy adapted Gardner's (1985) five-item Language Class Anxiety scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89), which measures students' feelings of anxiety in L2 classes, and Ely's (1986) six-item Language Class Risk-taking scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.80) that was designed to measure students' tendencies to take risks by using the TL in class. The five-point Likert scale ranged from strongly agree = 5, agree = 4, neither agree nor disagree = 3, disagree = 2 to strongly disagree = 1, with higher total scores indicating higher levels in each category. The wording for five of these items was phrased negatively (this indicates that the original questions were rephrased) in order to prevent the aim of the research from being detected by the participants (see Appendix 1). These items were reverse coded when recorded in an Excel file. The validity and reliability of the rephrased questions in the present study were anxiety = 0.86 and risk-taking = 0.80. The questionnaire also included demographic information and basic educational variables regarding English, such as gender, age, years at college, nationality, native language, department (major), class type (required or optional), hours of self-study, self-assessed motivation level, and self-assessed level of English proficiency (self-confidence).

The characteristics of the participants and the relationships between some variables and the anxiety levels assessed using the FLCA scale

were analysed using the SPSS statistics 23 (advanced version) (with statistical significance set at  $p < 0.05$ ).

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the results of the multiple linear regression analysis. A significant regression was found ( $F(1, 251) = 18.444, p < 0.001$ ), indicating an  $R^2$  of 0.346 for FLCA. The overall regression equation can be formulated as: the levels of anxiety =  $28.887 - 1.468$  (self-confidence)  $- 0.420$  (risk taking)  $- 0.118$  (self-study hours)  $- 0.028$  (motivation). As the significant predictors of the levels of anxiety, self-confidence was the strongest predictor, followed by risk-taking, hours of self-study and motivation.

## DISCUSSION

The quantitative survey revealed that promoting motivation and self-confidence and increasing risk-taking and after-school study-hour amongst students was closely related to low anxiety. If motivation is high, students will study longer on their own and if self-confident is strong, they will overcome their fears and take risks, which will manifest as lower anxiety. Piniel and Csizer's (2013) study supports the result of this study in that increasing the motivation and self-confidence of the participating students was found to be important for decreasing the anxiety, particularly when speaking in the TL. All the students' performance is on display in speaking classes, self-confidence, risk-taking, and motivation had a significant influence on students' anxiety levels and the students became self-conscious about their performances as a result of comparing themselves to their peers (Kitano, 2001). As a particularly bad example, the loss of self-confidence caused to abandon communication suddenly after making mistakes (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011). Students' on-going social comparisons and interactions led to increase self-consciousness and anxiety in FL speaking classes, mainly because they feared negative evaluations and losing face when they made mistakes (Gkonou, 2011). Similarly, students were reluctant to speak English when they were afraid of losing face due to making errors or misunderstandings, if they felt inferior in terms of speaking, or if they felt excessive peer pressure (Kang, 2005). Students performed better when listening and speaking in more relaxed classes and more anxious students saw themselves as having less ability, implying decreased self-confidence (Yan and Horwitz, 2008). The findings of Jordan and Gray (2019) and of Najeeb (2013) stated that teachers needed to encourage students to practice speaking English by providing a student-centred environment in order to develop their autonomy, motivation and self-confidence.

## IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion of this research, some ideas that teachers could consider when interacting with students during lessons are provided in this section. It is important to increase students' motivation, risk-taking, self-confidence, and self-study hours in order to decrease their levels of anxiety. Particularly in communication classes, students need to have many opportunities to practice speaking in order to build their confidence. Self-confidence is related strongly to self-awareness and relationships with others. Positive assessments from teachers and classmates would be able to improve students' self-confidence and thus decrease anxiety when learning a language, as supported by Dweck (1999). Additionally, since communication cannot occur without the participation of other people, if students know that what they say is understood by others, they will have more confidence.

This research implies that to lose students' self-confidence and motivation to learn English may increase their anxiety. Therefore, paying too much attention to errors or correcting errors excessively is not advisable in a communication class. Teachers should build the self-confidence of reticent students in a positive, caring environment by supporting them in a non-threatening manner or by facilitating interactive group activities (Liu & Jackson, 2008). Teachers should be sensitive towards students who are at risk of developing feelings of inferiority, bearing in mind that such feelings may develop into mental blocks that hinder progress. Therefore, Kitano (2001) proposed that teachers should identify students who experienced more anxiety as a result of negative

evaluations and treat them supportively, both inside and outside of the classroom. Similarly, Piechurska-Kuciel (2011) found that students who had more teacher support experienced less anxiety. It seems that teachers can play vital roles in instilling positive emotions and overcoming negative emotions. These findings suggest that it is important to create a friendly and non-threatening learning environment that does not involve students comparing themselves to each other or competing with their peers by instructing students not to hurt the feelings of others and encouraging collaboration amongst the students.

## CONCLUSION

Japanese EFL university students in communicative English classes participated in this study. The aim of this study was to find out what factors were related to students' anxiety. The quantitative data revealed that most students experienced some degree of anxiety, although the degree of anxiety varied. After all, students who were motivated and confident, who took risks in class, and who studied English longer on their own were less anxious. This is why it is very important to lower anxiety because when anxiety is lowered, students will feel more confident, take more risks in class, spend more time studying on their own, and be more motivated. Teachers should make efforts to decrease the students' levels of anxiety; these included ways of increasing the students' motivation to study English and their self-confidence. These suggestions could be taken into consideration when structuring classroom practices and activities. Moreover, teachers should always ensure that the underlying causes of anxiety are understood, identified in the classroom, and addressed appropriately. This will help to establish a positive language-learning environment, and will thus improve the learning process itself.

## APPENDIX 1

### The Five-Point Likert Scale Questionnaire

#### Part A. Foreign language classroom anxiety

- A1. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in English class.
- A2. I feel confident when I speak in English class.
- A3. I always feel that the other students are speaking English better than I do.
- A4. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in English class.
- A5. I do not care what other students think of me when I speak English.

#### Part B. Risk-taking

- B1. I like to wait until I know exactly how to use an English word before using it.
- B2. I like trying out difficult sentences in English class.
- B3. At this point, I don't like trying to express complicated ideas in English in class.
- B4. I prefer to say what I want in English without worrying about the small details of grammar.
- B5. In class, I do not need to say a sentence to myself before I speak.
- B6. I prefer to follow basic sentence models rather than risk misusing the language.

## REFERENCES

- Botes, E., Dewaele, J.-M., & Greiff, S. (2020). The foreign language classroom anxiety scale and academic achievement: An overview of the prevailing literature and a meta-analysis. *Journal for the Psychology of Language Learning*, 2, 26-56.
- Carless, D. (2008). Student use of the mother tongue in the task-based classroom. *ELT Journal*, 62(4), 331-338. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccm090>
- Dewaele, J.-M., Petrides, K. V., & Furnham, A. (2008). Effects of trait emotional intelligence and sociobiographical variables on communicative anxiety and foreign language anxiety among adult multilinguals: A review and empirical investigation. *Language Learning*, 58(4), 911-960. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2008.00482.x>
- Dweck, C. S. (1999). Caution--Praise can be dangerous. *American Educator*, 23(1), 4-9.
- Ely, C. M. (1986). An analysis of discomfort, risk-taking, sociability, and motivation in the L2 classroom. *Language Learning*, 36(1), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1986.tb00366.x>

- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. London, UK: Edward Arnold.
- Gkonou, C. (2011). Anxiety over EFL speaking and writing: A view from language classrooms. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 1(2), 267-281.
- Gregersen, T., MacIntyre, P. D., & Meza, M. D. (2014). The motion of emotion: Idiodynamic case studies of learners' foreign language anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 98(2), 574-588. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12084>
- Horwitz, E. K. (2000). It ain't over 'til it's over: On foreign language anxiety, first language deficits, and the confounding of variables. *The Modern Language Journal*, 84(2), 256-259. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0026-7902.00067>
- Jordan, G., & Gray, H. (2019). We need to talk about coursebooks. *ELT Journal*, 73(4), 438-446. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccz038>
- Kang, S.-J. (2005). Dynamic emergence of situational willingness to communicate in a second language. *System*, 33, 277-292. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2004.10.004>
- King, J. (2013). Silence in the second language classrooms of Japanese universities. *Applied Linguistics*, 34(3), 325-343. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/applin/ams043>.
- Kitano, K. (2001). Anxiety in the college Japanese language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 85(4), 549-566. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0026-7902.00125>
- Koch, A. S., & Terrell, T. D. (1991). *Affective reactions of foreign language students to natural approach activities and teaching techniques*. New Jersey, USA: Prentice Hall.
- Levine, G. S. (2003). Student and instructor beliefs and attitudes about target language use, first language use, and anxiety: Report of a questionnaire study. *The Modern Language Journal*, 87(3), 343-364. doi:10.1111/1540-4781.00194
- Liu, M., & Jackson, J. (2008). An exploration of Chinese EFL learners' unwillingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety. *The Modern language Journal*, 92(1), 71-86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2008.00687.x>
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Legatto, J. J. (2011). A dynamic system approach to willingness to communicate: Developing an idiodynamic method to capture rapidly changing affect. *Applied Linguistics*, 32(2), 149-171. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amq037>
- Najeeb, S. S. R. (2013). Learner autonomy in language learning. *Procedia-Social Behavioral Sciences*, 70, 1238-1242. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.01.183>
- Nishino, T., & Watanabe, M. (2008). Communication-oriented policies versus classroom realities in Japan. *TESOL Quarterly*, 42(1), 133-138. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1545-7249.2008.tb00214.x>
- Piechurska-Kuciel, E. (2011). Perceived teacher support and language anxiety in Polish secondary school EFL learners. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 1(1), 83-100.
- Piniel, K., & Csizer, K. (2013). L2 motivation, anxiety and self-efficacy: The interrelationship of individual variables in the secondary school context. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 3(4), 523-550.
- Price, M. L. (1991). *The subjective experience of foreign language anxiety: Interviews with highly anxious students*. NJ, USA: Prentice Hall.
- Rivers, D. J. (2011). Politics without pedagogy: Questioning linguistic exclusion. *ELT Journal*, 65(2), 103-113. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccq044>
- Saito, Y., & Samimy, K. K. (1996). Foreign language anxiety and language performance: A study of learner anxiety in beginning, intermediate, and advanced-level college students of Japanese. *Foreign Language Annals*, 29(2), 239-249. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1996.tb02330.x>
- Wicking, P. (2016). The role of formative assessment in global human resource development. *JALT Journal*, 38(1), 27-43.
- Yan, J. X., & Horwitz, E. K. (2008). Learners' perceptions of how anxiety interacts with personal and instructional factors to influence their achievement in English: A qualitative analysis of EFL learners in China. *Language Learning*, 58(1), 151-183. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2007.00437.x>
- Young, D. J. (1990). An investigation of students' perspectives on anxiety and speaking. *Foreign language Annals*, 23(6), 539-567. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1990.tb00424.x>
- Young, D. J. (1991). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: What does language anxiety research suggest? *The Modern Language Journal*, 75(4), 426-439. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1991.tb05378.x>
- Zhang, X. (2019). Foreign language anxiety and foreign language performance: A meta analysis. *The Modern Language Journal*, 103(4), 763-781. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12590>