

Japanese Foreign Students' Language Anxiety: A Descriptive Study of Their Apprehension When Speaking English

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Introduction

"I sometimes worry if Americans understand my English. I am irritated at my low English proficiency when I cannot express what I want to say satisfactorily" (Baba, 1994, p.39). This is a comment of a Japanese foreign student who at that time was studying at a university in California as an undergraduate student.

In this author's experience as a Japanese foreign student who studied at a graduate school in the United States, many Japanese foreign students studying at American higher educational institutions were observed being apprehensive on the occasion of speaking English to native English speakers. Some of them got irritated at their low proficiency of English and/or their inadequate English pronunciation, some became anxious about making grammatical mistakes, and others had a fear of speaking the language, and therefore simply tried to avoid occasions for communicating with native speakers. Furthermore, their anxiety levels seemed to increase especially in classroom settings, where, when alongside their English-speaking peers, many of them believed correct English must be spoken.

Previous research (Baba, 1994) of Japanese foreign students in the United States revealed that the students became apprehensive when they spoke English to native English speakers. Some students in the research reported that they got irritated toward themselves if they could not express what they wanted to say satisfactorily when communicating in English. Others indicated that fear of making mistakes in speaking English made them remain silent in the classroom.

Their anxiety accompanying English use could be a

serious problem because it might serve as a language barrier to their acquisition of English, despite the fact that for many of them, one of the primary reasons to come to the U.S. was considered to be acquiring English as a second language (L2). When they were in college classes, moreover, their anxiety might create a barrier to classroom interactions because students' failures to behave as expected (participate actively) due to apprehension might be perceived negatively by other communicators including teachers. Thus, it seems of much importance to describe and explicate English language anxiety that Japanese students were experiencing.

This is a study based on the data from the author's 1994 research of Japanese foreign students in the United States. Although the primary purpose of the previous research was to investigate the relationship between Japanese students' language use and their ethnic identity, it also revealed that many of the students in the research were experiencing apprehension accompanying English use. However, from the point of investigating language anxiety, the research was limited because it did not give a close inquiry about the anxiety the students were experiencing. Therefore, this study will focus on the anxiety they felt when speaking English. What was the anxiety accompanying L2 use like? Under what situations did the Japanese students experience anxiety? How did they perceive their own anxiety? What caused them to be apprehensive? By reexamining the actual interview data from the previous research, this study will describe English language anxiety among Japanese foreign students and attempt to explicate some causes for the anxiety.

Language Anxiety

According to Horwitz and Young (1991), there are two approaches to the description of language anxiety. One is to say that language anxiety may be viewed as a manifestation of other more general types of anxiety. For instance, "test-anxious people may feel anxious when learning a language because they

feel constantly tested, or shy people may feel uncomfortable because of the demands of communicating publicly" (p.1). The other approach defines language anxiety as a distinctive form of anxiety expressed in response to language learning. "That is, something unique to the language-learning experience makes some individuals nervous" (p.1). Supporting the latter approach, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) hypothesize that anxiety specific to language learning parallels three related performance anxieties, that is, communication apprehension (CA), test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. They further propose that foreign language anxiety is not simply the combination of these three parallels but rather is a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process.

From the viewpoint of the first language (L1) communication, McCroskey (1984) defines communication apprehension as an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated oral communication with another person or persons. He points out that typical behavior patterns of people who are communicatively apprehensive are communication avoidance and communication withdrawal. Daly (1991) also considers CA is the fear or anxiety experienced by people when communicating in their first language, and he discusses the existence of some logical ties between L1 communication apprehension and L2 communication apprehension.

The author's interpretation of English language anxiety in this study rather involves apprehension accompanying Japanese foreign students' speaking English as a L2 both inside and outside their content classrooms. It secondarily refers to the anxiety incidental to their English learning. Even when it refers to English learning anxiety, it does not necessarily represent the anxiety felt in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom, but it first refers to the anxiety experienced when learning English through everyday conversations with native

speakers or lectures and discussions at school.

Numbers of research point out that language anxiety hinders language learning/acquisition. Madsen, Brown, and Jones (1991) state that high levels of anxiety can interfere with language learning. Also, Horwitz et al. (1986) suggest that anxiety is a major obstacle to overcome in learning to speak another language. Furthermore, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) explain that language anxiety consistently, negatively affects language learning and production. Aida (1994) conducted a study on language anxiety among American college students learning Japanese as a foreign language. She concluded that language anxiety was negatively related to students' performance in Japanese. According to Krashen (1982), a variety of affective variables such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety, relate to success in L2 acquisition. He states that low anxiety appears to be conducive to L2 acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety. That is, learner's anxiety contributes to an affective filter, which makes the learner unreceptive to comprehensible language input. Accordingly, acquisition may be hindered.

Daly states that anxiety associated with language use can affect the academic success of students. By surveying previous research on CA, he summarizes that low apprehensive students do better on academic achievement and have higher grade point averages than higher apprehensive peers do.

Mejías, Applbaum, Applbaum, and Trotter's (1991) studies of communication apprehension among Mexican American high school and college students outside the classroom show that bilingual students experience less CA in their dominant language than in their L2. That is, non-native English speaking Mexican American students tend to become more apprehensive when they communicate in English (their L2) than in Spanish (their dominant language). According to Mejías et al., this occurs across communication contexts. They also state that L2 learners with a higher level of CA tend to avoid situations in

which they need to function in the L2. This behavior may then lead the learners to lose good opportunities for practicing L2 and receiving L2 feedback and consequently prevents their optimal L2 acquisition. It is assumed that this was also true of the Japanese foreign students who were L2 learners studying at higher educational institutions in the United States.

The Previous Research of Japanese Foreign Students in the United States

Baba's research (1994) of Japanese foreign college students in the United States was conducted primarily to investigate whether or not there was any relationship between ethnic identity of the Japanese and their language maintenance and language shift (Japanese and English). The source of data was 32 Japanese foreign students including both graduates and undergraduates from three community colleges and one university in Sacramento, California. Subjects included 15 males and 17 females ranging age from 19 to 33 years of age. Their length of residence (LOR) in the United States varied from a 10-month period to a 6-year period. Japanese was the native language for all of them, and English was the second. Each of them were interviewed by the author. Interviews took place on their college campuses, at local cafeterias, and at their residences.

The content of interview questions focused around four general topic areas: (a) the background information on each subject, including age, educational level, major, and length of residence in the U.S.; (b) social associates and reasons for associating with them; (c) English language proficiency (TOEFL score) and the usage of English versus Japanese in the U.S.; and (d) subject's thoughts about using English and Japanese in the United States.

When asked which language they would prefer to use to conduct the interview, all of the subjects chose Japanese. The interview conversations were tape recorded with the agreement of the participants in order to assure precise information. After

each interview, the author listened to the audiotapes and translated all the dialogues into English. Translation was done with the greatest possible care in order to retain meaning in subjects' response. The length of time of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours and 30 minutes.

Results showed that there did not seem to be a very strong relationship between the Japanese foreign students' ethnic identity and their language use. Confirming their ethnic identity was not the reason why they communicated in their native language. The majority of the students related their ethnic identity more with cultural practices than with language itself.

Twenty-six out of the 32 Japanese students turned out to be associating only with other Japanese. All of the Japanese students usually conversed in Japanese with their Japanese friends while some chatted in English occasionally. Eight indicated that they spoke the Japanese language 100% of the time when they were not in the college classroom. While spending most of their off-campus time (and for some, also on-campus time) with other Japanese, they did not consider it good behavior to be associating only with Japanese. The majority of them thought their English improvement had been hindered by speaking Japanese all the time. Moreover, many of them hoped to spend less time with Japanese and more time with native English speakers in order to improve their English proficiency.

According to the students, the reasons for maintaining their native language among other Japanese students even in the States were out of rationality and practicality. They spoke Japanese because it was more practical than speaking English. Also, peer pressure was another reason for not using English to carry on conversations with fellow Japanese students. Some of them said they did not want other Japanese to hear their poor English, and others stated they did not want fellow Japanese students to think they were showing off their English proficiency. These reasons may explain why each of the students chose

Japanese as the language to conduct the interview.

Japanese Foreign Students' Language Anxiety

In Baba's 1994 research, the Japanese students interviewed revealed the stress they felt when speaking English to native speakers. Twenty-four out of 32 confirmed that they experienced anxiety when having conversations with native English speakers in informal settings. One of them indicated, "I sometimes worry if Americans understand my English. I am irritated at my low English proficiency when I cannot express what I want to say satisfactorily." Another added, "My English pronunciation is bad. I always worry if Americans understand me. I feel very nervous when I talk with them."

Several other comments manifesting their English speaking anxiety are:

"Whenever I speak with Americans, I feel I need to study English more. I am disappointed when I cannot express my feelings fully in English. So I often think of my lines before meeting native speakers such as my friends, teacher, or advisor, so that I won't get nervous when speaking."

"I have an inferiority complex. I worry if my English makes sense."

"...I think I talk very politely sometimes and very rudely other times... I'm afraid that I become a different person when I speak English. I get stressed when I can't remember the right word."

"I feel frustrated when I speak English."

"If Americans look irritated when I'm talking with them, I don't want to talk with them anymore."

"I always hope to speak English more fluently. Sometimes I make mistakes. When I'm speaking, I still worry about making mistakes, and I have to concentrate my attention on not making mistakes."

In these comments of the Japanese students, the term 'Americans' usually implied native speakers of English.

Eight students, on the other hand, stated that they did not become anxious or nervous on the occasions of having informal conversations with native English speakers. One of these students said, "I think my English is good. I like hanging around with Americans and speaking English. I don't feel like I'm an alien because of my English proficiency." Another stated, "I know my English proficiency is lower than Americans', of course. ...I don't get nervous because my English is bad."

Five out of these eight students revealed that, although they formerly had become apprehensive when having informal English conversations, they no longer did. According to one of them, "I used to become very anxious when speaking English, but not anymore." As time passed, they became used to living in the United States and also communicating in English, and consequently their anxiety disappeared.

The Japanese students, including the above-mentioned eight students, did make a distinction between speaking English in casual conversations and speaking English inside their college classroom. Twenty-seven out of 32 reported that they became apprehensive when speaking in the classroom. This included seven out of eight students who indicated that they did not become apprehensive in informal settings. When the students referred to 'the classroom', it did not mean the ESL classroom, but it usually meant college content classrooms where they were surrounded by native-English-speaking peers. Some students indicated a tendency to be overly worried about making linguistic mistakes in classes, and others were afraid of presenting their opinions in front of their peers and the teacher. One of them stated, "I don't want to make grammatical mistakes when I speak in class. Speaking in class is just very different from chatting with friends, so even if I know the answer I don't raise my hand. Everybody is listening to me. It's pressure." Another stated, revealing his feelings about making linguistic

mistakes, "Because I'm a Japanese, I don't like making mistakes in class. I want to speak correct English. When I make mistakes, I feel very disappointed." Further, another indicated, "I am afraid of asking questions of the teacher in class. I don't want my classmates to look at me. I don't want to interrupt the lecture because of my poor English."

Other comments indicating their feelings toward expressing ideas and opinions in English in the classroom are:

"I certainly have an inferiority complex when I speak in class. I cannot say what I want to say immediately."

"I have never taken a class where I have to speak in front of classmates because I don't want to speak English in front of people."

"I am afraid of speaking in class."

"I get nervous when speaking English in class. I don't volunteer to talk in class."

"It's always stressful to present opinions in class. I can explain my opinions in Japanese but not in English. Also, I'm afraid of giving my opinions in English because my classmates may ask me questions about what I just said in English. I just can't answer them instantly. I need a lot of time to translate my Japanese thoughts into English."

While the majority suffered English speaking apprehension, four students answered they did not become apprehensive when speaking inside the classroom. "My classmates and the teacher will understand that I am from Japan and my English is not very good. As long as they understand what I am trying to say, it's okay to make mistakes, and I don't get nervous," said one student. Another stated, "My classmates understand me. I'm not embarrassed. I can participate in discussions." Further, another student said, "I present my opinions in class all the time. I know Japanese students don't do that very often."

Except for the above-mentioned four students, the rest of

the Japanese students became apprehensive when speaking English in the classroom. Then, what did they think about making English mistakes, especially in classes? As stated earlier, several students said they did not want to or did not like to make mistakes. For instance, one student stated, "I feel ashamed when I make English mistakes." Another student, who experienced English speaking anxiety, felt differently about making mistakes in the ESL and in content classrooms; "I don't care about making English mistakes in the ESL classroom because my classmates also make mistakes. But I'm afraid of making mistakes in content classrooms."

While many of them did not want to make English mistakes, fourteen students stated clearly that whatever the situation, making English mistakes when speaking was acceptable. The following are the comments of these students:

"It's okay to make mistakes when speaking English. We learn from mistakes."

"If you don't make mistakes, you don't learn."

"Of course, not making mistakes is the best, but it's okay to make mistakes. Making sense is the priority."

"Even in the classroom, I think making English mistakes is okay because I'm a Japanese and I cannot speak English very well."

"I don't feel ashamed of making English mistakes at all. ...even when you are in class, it is good to make mistakes. Japanese are usually ashamed of making mistakes, though."

"I don't think my classmates and teachers expect me to speak perfect English."

Discussion

Many of the Japanese foreign students in the author's 1994 research appeared to be experiencing English language anxiety when speaking the language. They knew their English pronunciation was often inaccurate and their vocabulary was

limited. They were conscious of making grammatical mistakes and using incorrect words. When they were overly self-conscious about their English-speaking proficiency, they became unwilling to talk or even afraid of speaking. In informal settings, 75% of them (24 students) confirmed experiencing language anxiety. That is, for some of the students, even a casual conversation with native speakers could have been a stressful, apprehension-provoking experience.

Many researchers in the field of communication assume that personality characteristics correlate with apprehension in communicating. According to Daly (1991), more than a hundred personality characteristics are found to correlate with communication apprehension. For example, CA is inversely related to the tendency of a person to be self-disclose, be dominant, and assertive. On the other hand, it is positively related to loneliness, general anxiety, and intolerance for ambiguity. Daly states that the above-mentioned correlations are seen in L1 communication application, and he adds they also apply to L2 CA.

More recently, researchers have begun to pay attention to the nature of situational apprehension. They focus on situations that make people more or less anxious about communicating, regardless of their dispositional apprehension. Situational elements that have been found to correlate with CA include such things as perceived novelty, subordinate status of the speaker, conspicuousness, and audience size (Johannes, 1998). It can be assumed that some of the Japanese foreign students in Baba's research had personality traits that were more positively associated with language anxiety. At the same time, it is also possible that several situational factors caused them to feel situational apprehension when they were communicating in the L2. Therefore, in this discussion the students' English speaking anxiety is not classified into dispositional or situational apprehensions. Rather, a combination of dispositional factors and several apprehension-provoking situations is considered to have interacted intricately with each other, and it has caused them to experience levels of

anxiety.

Baba (1994) reports that the Japanese foreign students' lack of confidence in speaking English contributes to forming a gap between native English speakers and themselves. Lack of confidence in speaking English was also one of the causes for the Japanese students to become apprehensive. One student said, "I speak out in the ESL classroom. Everybody in class is learning English. I feel comfortable in ESL class because my classmates' English is no better than mine. But I never speak out in classes where my classmates are native English speakers." This student felt comfortable speaking English in the ESL classroom because he knew his English proficiency was about the same level as, or maybe higher than his peers'. However, he did not want to present opinions in content classrooms, where, he was well aware that his classmates' English proficiency was higher than his. This student did not have confidence in his English and did not want to make English mistakes and therefore, felt anxiety in speaking the language when he was among native-English-speaking classmates. Aida (1994) reports that lack of confidence in communicating in a foreign language influences on the learner's speaking of the language. According to her, "it is very likely that people experience anxiety and reluctance in communicating with other people or in expressing themselves in a foreign language in which they do not have full competence" (p.157).

Whenever the Japanese students were in content classrooms, English speaking anxiety became even more heightened for most of them. Among them 84.3% (27 students) confirmed becoming apprehensive inside the classroom. For the Japanese foreign students the instructional language of their college classes was the L2. Accordingly, inside the classroom, they had to listen to, understand, speak and exchange ideas in their L2. Moreover, they believed, and they thought their classmates were aware, that their English proficiency was lower than their peers' and not good enough to present opinions and ideas adequately or

maybe grammatically correctly. Some also thought correct English should be spoken in the classroom. Therefore, they tended to exhibit high levels of apprehension, and consequently behaved passively.

Daly states that the degree of perceived evaluation likely plays a substantial role in language anxiety. That is, people may become uncomfortable speaking when they become conscious that someone may be judging their performance. According to him, this is one of the reasons why some students report being able to converse easily at home but when they get into the classroom they find themselves tongue-tied. Mejías et al. (1991) found that the pattern of communication apprehension increased with the increasing formality and social complexity of communicative situations. That is to say, CA increases as the context moves from dyad to group to meeting to public context. Based on this, they suggest that CA is experienced more intensely in more formal situations involving greater numbers of participants, such as in classroom interactions or when speaking before an audience. Moreover, as stated earlier, their studies showed that CA heightens when bilingual students speak in their L2. In light of these theories, it was quite natural for the Japanese foreign students to experience levels of apprehension even higher in the classroom because they were in more formal situations speaking the L2 and were conscious of their comments might be evaluated.

While many of the students hoped not to make English mistakes and therefore became apprehensive especially when speaking in the classroom, 43.7% of them (14 students) said the act of making linguistic mistakes should be acceptable. It is assumed that, although the Japanese students expected their classmates and teachers to accept their limited English to a degree, some of them still wished to speak linguistically correct English. The following comment of one student represents this seemingly contradictory feeling; "It's okay to make English mistakes, but I don't want to. Because I'm a foreign student,

it is accepted. But I want to speak correct English, especially in classes."

There were some students who did not experience apprehension when orally communicating in English. Twenty-five percent (eight students) answered that they did not become apprehensive in informal contexts. However, five of them answered that they used to become apprehensive when speaking English. It is assumed that as these students lived in the U.S. longer and gained more experience in speaking English, they became used to communicating in the L2. For this reason, some former apprehension-provoking situations were no longer worries for them. Possibly their English proficiency has improved over the period, and they may have gained confidence in speaking the language. Accordingly, their anxiety decreased.

The number of students who answered that they did not experience apprehension in the classroom was four (12.5%). Interestingly, three out of these four students said that in informal conversations they did experience English speaking anxiety. Experiencing language anxiety in informal settings but not in formal settings such as in the classroom seems contrary to Mejías et al.'s findings. Although these students were in the minority, they were experiencing apprehension in this way. Why was this happening?

The following hypothesis may serve as one of the reasons among several others. Since some Japanese students had disclosed in the classroom that they were international students whose English proficiency was limited, they expected their classmates and the teacher to accept their limited English. As stated earlier, 43.7% expected their English mistakes to be accepted in classes. Accordingly, they believed that their limited English had been justified in the classroom and therefore their classmates and teachers would listen to them. Consequently, when they had to speak English, there would have been no need for some of them to become apprehensive any longer. As some students said, their classmates and the teacher would understand their

circumstances. However, the opposite could be happening in informal situations. When once they were out of the classroom, the person whom they spoke English to might not have as much patience with their English as their classmates and teachers did. The Japanese students understood that their limited English was justified only in the classroom. Besides, many of the students disclosed that, wherever the place, they were unwilling to speak English unless their native-English-speaking listeners showed understanding toward them and tried to listen to them. One student said, "I cannot speak English very well. And Americans seem not to be interested in what I say, so I don't want to talk with them." It is possible for some students engaged in an informal conversation to be more apprehensive when their listener is less tolerant of their English.

Apprehension associated with English use can impede Japanese foreign students' acquisition of English as a second language because it hinders their associating with native English speakers. Educators and counselors in both the United States and Japan need to pay more attention to this language anxiety of Japanese students since it could also serve as a barrier to academic success for an increasing number of Japanese foreign students.

This study tried to describe English speaking anxiety among the Japanese foreign students in Baba's previous study. It also attempted to explain under what situations they experienced anxiety and what caused the apprehension. This study may serve to gain preliminary understanding of Japanese foreign students' English speaking anxiety. The subjects of this study were 32 Japanese students' from the author's previous study and, thus, it is limited in sample size and scope. A research with wider sample size may be called for to offer more concrete extrapolations, and comparable research on foreign students' (other than Japanese) L2 speaking anxiety may be valuable for understanding the nature of Japanese foreign students' English speaking anxiety.

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