

[論 文]

Learning Strategies that Combat Speaking Anxiety: A Qualitative Study among Adolescent Non-native English Speakers in Japan

Yoko Watanabe

Abstract

This longitudinal, qualitative study aimed to determine the effectiveness of an English language programme in Japan. Using one-to-one semi-structured interviews, we examined 16 students' self-reported English-speaking ability and what they found effective to reduce their speaking anxiety. The students, enrolled in a private Japanese secondary school, completed three interviews over 2 years. The first interview took place when the students were in eighth grade, the second at the beginning of ninth grade and the third at the end of ninth grade after they had taken part in the school's short-term study abroad programme in Australia. The results of the first round of interviews indicated that students found that listening practice helped them learn vocabulary, grammar rules and sentence structure. In the second round of interviews, students reported, that learning grammar rules was the most effective strategy for learning English. In the third set of interviews, students reported that a balanced learning environment, in conjunction with their positive attitudes and determination to interact with others, helped their language comprehension, reinforced existing knowledge and minimised speaking anxiety. These findings can be utilised in the development of foreign language programmes to fulfil students' needs and maximise educational benefits.

Key words: English as a foreign language, Japanese secondary school, learner perceptions, non-native English speaker, second-language acquisition, study abroad programme

Introduction

Language learners sometimes experience discomfort and apprehension and may face varying levels of anxiety. Language anxiety is linked to a range of responses in the human mind, and it is characterised by a feeling of looming social disaster (Samuelsson, 2011). Liu and Hong (2021) found that young Chinese students, when feeling happy, were often more attentive and active in class and studied English more diligently. This suggests that English language classroom anxiety and enjoyment are important, independent emotional factors that affect students' English learning. These findings indicate that independent variables are positive predictors of students' academic achievement. The level of academic achievement increases as the use of strategy increases (Oflaz, 2019). Similarly, students' shyness, foreign language anxiety and language learning strategies predicted the academic achievement of students learning the German language (Oflaz, 2019). Language anxiety also indicates some pedagogical implications, in particular, for the language instructor in class as one of the factors responsible for choosing the

appropriate design for language tasks to motivate the students to improve their self-confidence and self-efficacy (He, Zhou, & Zhang, 2021). To make language learning more meaningful and effective, it is essential to identify the factors responsible for causing and reducing students' speaking anxiety.

The issue of speaking anxiety is being considered in Japanese schools because of the influence it can have on second-language learning and teaching and performance. In Japan, English is valued highly as a foreign language subject, to the extent that a formal framework for the subject was set up by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 1998, 2008a). Until 2012, the curriculum focused on grammar drills and translation methods, because the primary aim was to pass formal, written university entrance examinations. Consequently, many students failed to attain higher levels in spoken English (Aspinall, 2006). In 2012, the entrance exams for universities were redesigned, and the framework for learning English, as devised by the MEXT, was revised accordingly.

The national educational programme reformed English programmes for middle and secondary schools in 2012 and 2013 to include communication activities encompassing grammar instruction and the teaching of critical thinking skills. Further, in April 2020, a new primary school English programme was implemented for fifth and sixth grades (10-to 12-year-olds) with an index that values the importance of engaging in receptive communication in a foreign language (MEXT, 2008b). The reformed national curriculum, which was first implemented in 2012, focused on improving standards of English achievement by raising expectations, setting a national target and focusing on assessments. The MEXT adopted the Common European Framework for Reference (CEFR), including a descriptive scale of language proficiency and specific proficiency targets (A1-A2 as target levels for lower-secondary students; Shillaw, 2017) for elementary and secondary school students.

Despite these innovations, teachers have continued to observe that a growing number of students consider English to be a challenging subject, causing them considerable stress and anxiety (Sampson, 2015). Although studies have found that anxiety and achievement are not correlated, and the relationship between the two is still not fully clear, a variety of factors, including motivation, personality, self-confidence and language learning experience are potential causes of language anxiety (Cutrone, 2009). In the revised MEXT programme, students began learning English in the fifth grade via foreign language conversation classes that are part of a global studies programme. The classes meet once a week and introduce students to English through activities, such as playing games and singing songs in English. The students do not formally learn grammar or reading until the end of the sixth grade. In the seventh and eighth grades, their daily learning consists mainly of listening and speaking practice. In the ninth grade, students study grammar-based reading and practise speaking.

This study will be of interest to English teachers considering the process of students learning English to ease their speaking anxiety by having more opportunities to speak and listen to English than before the English education reforms. This study aims to investigate processes and thoughts students have regarding combating speaking anxiety in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom over 2 years. The study examined factors that students believed influenced their ability to learn in a particular instructional framework, including how their daily English learning is needed in conversing during a

short-term study abroad programme.

Effects of foreign language anxiety

Foreign language learners may experience different levels of anxiety depending on their differing language skills (Horwitz, 2001). Foreign language anxiety, in this case, relating to the English language, comprises communication apprehension in speaking or listening to another individual, social evaluation, how one's actions will be perceived by others and test anxiety related to the fear of failure and is an important factor that influences one's level of achievement (Dordinejad & Ahmadabad, 2014). Although language anxiety may have a negative effect, it can also facilitate language learning, as it might generate an eagerness to learn or to improve (Tanveer, 2007). Hashimoto (2002) found that anxiety exerted a strong influence on perceived competence, affected willingness to communicate negatively and can interfere with the process of language learning.

Many elements, such as age, length of foreign language study, gender, living or staying in a foreign-language-speaking country, academic achievement, other foreign languages learnt, self-perceived foreign language proficiency, perceived self-worth and perfectionism are reflected in foreign language learning, which is related to foreign language acquisition (Kunt & Tüm, 2010; Dewaele & Al Saraj, 2015). Learners who rate their proficiency highly in the target language tend to experience lower levels of foreign language anxiety (Bensalem & Thompson, 2021). A correlation between foreign language anxiety and experience abroad has been found (Thompson & Lee, 2012). They indicated that the level of foreign language anxiety can be reduced depending on the learner's level of proficiency in the target language. Bensalem (2018) also argued that a length of stay abroad of less than a month has not been long enough to have a significant impact on levels of foreign language anxiety among Saudi multi-linguals. Thompson and Khawaja (2015) provided a possible explanation in that multi-linguals experience less anxiety than bilinguals because they know more than two languages, allowing them to develop more grammar learning strategies and they will experience reduced levels of anxiety.

Bottom-up and top-down processing

In communication, people need to listen, comprehend and speak, and both bottom-up and top-down language processing are required (Hinkel, 2006). Bottom-up processing and top-down processing occur together while learners pay attention to conversational expressions, words and phrases (Richards, 2008). The predominant process depends on the listener's familiarity with the topic and the purpose of listening (Richards, 2008).

Bottom-up processing is when language is understood by looking at individual meanings or grammatical characteristics of the most basic units of the text; comprehension is facilitated through the development of a large vocabulary and a good working knowledge of sentence structure (Farrell, 2000). Top-down processing occurs when background information is used to predict the meaning of a message and is also essential for effective communication. A top-down focus that increases learners' background knowledge of a topic is important for promoting L2 speaking skills in the educational context (Zimmerman, 2008).

Speaking anxiety

Kondo and Yang (2003) argued that spoken discourse is an instant action, and people normally have only one chance when listening. This produces a certain amount of stress that is largely dependent on age and extant English listening experience and ability. A study by Djigunovic (2006) showed that when anxious students speak in a foreign language, they often take longer to express an idea than non-anxious students, as they speak with longer mid-clause pauses and make more false starts.

There are five main reasons for speaking anxiety, namely low English proficiency, lack of task familiarity, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes and incomprehensible inputs (Liu, 2006). Fear of negative evaluation, fear of speaking inaccurately, fear of being in public and shyness are also factors related to speaking anxiety (Zhiping & Paramasivam, 2013).

Kitano (2001) described that fear of negative evaluation and anxiety had a direct correlation among Japanese students of English as a second language at an American university. He indicated that unrealistic goal-setting for students at the native speaker level created anxiety. This may be an outcome of the way Japanese society assesses ability and potential. Cutrone (2009) noted how, from an early age, Japanese students take several tests that have an enormous bearing on their future. The ideals of reliability and quality permeating Japanese society cause the latter to put considerable emphasis on the assessment paradigm (Doyon, 2000). He suggested that the Japanese school system's evaluation is to blame for students' fear of making mistakes while speaking.

Students' coping mechanisms for speaking anxiety

By contrast, Williams and Andrade (2008) found that students were convinced that they could not do anything to counteract speaking anxiety and just gave up. Another study indicated that respondents in China seemed to be at a loss when asked about the strategies for coping with their speaking anxiety, with only a few of them stating that they should have more practice and build up self-confidence and that teachers should aim to provide a 'friendly, supportive and non-threatening classroom-learning environment' (Liu, 2007).

Methods

Study setting

This study will provide a foundation for supporting students to improve their self-regulation skills by coping with their anxiety about speaking in English. This longitudinal study investigated how students process their learning and cope with speaking anxiety. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to understand and categorise students' strategies to minimise speaking anxiety.

Questions were adapted from Zhiping and Paramasivam's (2013) study on students' classroom English-speaking anxiety. The questions were simplified and shortened as follows:

- 1) How do you feel when speaking English in class?
- 2) What strategies do you use to minimise your anxiety when speaking English in class?
- 3) How did your classroom English-speaking practice help you control your speaking anxiety during the study abroad programme?

Design

Research data were collected via recorded semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to identify students' approaches to managing learning during speaking activities. The interviews lasted approximately 15 min. The researcher audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews, and the information was coded. The interviews were conducted in Japanese to ensure that participants could express relevant information without English proficiency being an issue.

Procedure and design

The study was conducted during the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 academic years. As the school year begins in April and ends in March in Japan, the first interview took place in May 2016 (T1), the second in May 2017 (T2) and the third in March 2018 (T3) after the participants had returned from a 2-week-long study abroad programme in Australia.

Participants

The participants were 16 Japanese students at a co-educational private school in Tokyo who had participated in the reformed national curriculum for English. At the beginning of the research period, they were all in the eighth grade. They were selected because the researcher had worked closely with them previously, and their grade was the first that had taken part in the reformed national curriculum starting in the fifth grade. Students had little contact with English outside of class aside from hearing English songs (e.g. on the radio). A few had communicated in English either via writing or speaking in their primary school days except for approximately 50 students (not included in the sample) who had lived abroad. From the seventh to 12th grades in secondary school, all the students were enrolled in a credit-bearing English course, which is compulsory. The participants had no previous experience studying abroad.

Data analysis

This study used a thematic analysis approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012), which includes the identification, analysis and interpretation of common themes and meaning patterns within the data. As this method held that a rigorous thematic approach can produce an insightful analysis that answers particular research questions, a detailed analysis of each interview helped to identify implications regarding responses and the applicability of ideas. We grouped similar words and phrases into categories to code students' thoughts and experiences regarding speaking tasks, difficulties, frustration and motivation.

Ethical considerations

After providing a brief introduction to the research project, informed consent was obtained from the students, parents and the school principal regarding confidentiality and the right to use the materials, as proposed by Vetenskapsrådet (2002). Students were informed that they would be asked to comment on their personal experiences regarding L2 learning in the eighth and ninth grades and that the 15-year-old participants would provide feedback after a study abroad programme in Australia the following year, at

the end of ninth grade. Students were also notified that their participation would be voluntary and anonymous, and their data would be used solely for research purposes. Written permission was obtained from the parents of all participants.

In this study, we investigated students' experiences before and after a study abroad English programme, which is part of the reformed programme and takes place in the ninth grade. The programme aims to encourage students to undertake self-exploration and improve their English-speaking skills through personal connections.

In the study abroad programme, a coordinator pairs each Japanese student with a host family, and a child from that family is the student's 'buddy' at school. During the day, the students attend EFL classes conducted by a qualified Australian instructor in the morning and join their buddy's class in the afternoon. Japanese students interact with Australian students during recess and after school and communicate with their host families at home.

During the programme, the students are accompanied by Japanese teachers who check their daily schedules, health condition, relationship with home-stay families and general well-being. They also plan afternoon classes and review students' communication attitudes, motivation and second language (L2) communication progress.

Results

The first interview question evaluated students' perception of the effect of English language learning on English-speaking ability. The answers showed a variation in students' language anxiety levels, consisting of key term definitions and an open-ended question related to the coverage of speaking English in the class. The mean score for each subcomponent of the anxiety scale was computed from the collected data to investigate what category of second-language-use anxiety the participants felt strongly in class. The descriptive statistics of English-speaking in the classroom were indicated via four subcomponents: speaking confidence, negative evaluation of their performance, fear of negative evaluation from students and teachers, and communication anxiety with students and teachers. As the results of descriptive statistics show, using the criteria that were established in the section of the data analysis, the participants' anxiety levels in class, in general, were categorised into four levels: (1) worry, (2) uncertainty, (3) hesitation with some enjoyment, and (4) mostly enjoyment.

At T1, half of the students expressed English-speaking anxiety, but this may just have been uncertainty or hesitation. At T2, students' worry and uncertainty increased, and feelings of enjoyment decreased when compared with the previous year. At T3, soon after the students returned to Japan from Australia, most of the students reported some degree of happiness with their speaking performance, although a few expressed worry, uncertainty or hesitation. Three students responded 'Felt more uncertain rather than worried about speaking'. All three students reported that they responded to all questions when asked by Australian teachers in class, as well as dealing well with pair work while attending EFL class. They reported that all of their work would have been harder without their classmates and they responded to the teachers' friendliness as they spoke to them and encouraged them

with patience. Speaking up in class was far easier than it had been in Japan. Two students responded that they 'sometimes hesitated but had fun'. Both said they enjoyed responding to all questions and had fun working as pairs and groups in Australia, which often takes place in Japan as well, but causes nervousness among students.

Furthermore, eleven students responded that they 'felt okay with/enjoyed speaking English', which none of the students at T1 or T2 did. At T3, students responded that they were able to confidently handle English class without particularly worrying, which does not normally happen in English classes in Japan. In their EFL class in Australia, their speaking performance was much better and they did not feel that they forced themselves to speak up. Five out of eleven students stated that 'the atmosphere of everyone using English helped speak up'. Six students also indicated 'the relaxing atmosphere helped me respond in class. My performance was far better than the first 2-3 days, and I was happy to speak when we had time to communicate and exchange our thoughts on different topics'. Table 1 presents the students' experiences when speaking English in class.

Table 1 Student responses to 'How did you feel speaking English in class?'

Response	Response at T1	Response at T2	Response at T3
	(n = 16)	(n = 16)	(n = 16)
Constantly felt uncomfortable and worried when listening and speaking	1	2	0
Felt worried but was more uncertain about speaking	8	10	3
Sometimes hesitated but had fun	7	4	2
Felt okay/enjoyed speaking English	0	0	11

Note. T1: Time 1, May 2016; T2: Time 2, May 2017; T3: Time 3, March 2018

Table 2 shows the students' responses to the question on the strategies they use for minimising their anxiety when speaking English in class. Students used speaking English with a friend (i.e. peer-seeking strategy) to lessen anxiety. At T1, students reported that they enjoyed speaking English in a group. Their minds were relaxed because they were confident about and open to learning English. At T2, students indicated that they would like to contribute to a group/pair task, which motivated students to continue working. The students also indicated that group work learning objectives and simplified tasks reduced worry and uncertainty when speaking.

At T1, students indicated confidence in speaking English without relying on L1 and tended to think they should not always rely on L1. By contrast, most students at T2 used both L1 and L2. At both T1 and T2, students reported seeking speaking practice outside the class via school or an online application.

Table 2-1 indicates that eighth- and ninth-grade students' most common anxiety reduction strategy was preparation and self-encouragement. At T1, vocabulary and listening helped reduce anxiety; students mentioned that they visualised images as they listened or read and that they drew upon existing knowledge when listening. At T2, students reported little interest in listening or visualising images;

instead, they focused on reading comprehension and grammar through reading, writing and working in grammar workbooks. Nevertheless, they did not always find that grammar learning helped improve their speech.

In a study on students' coping mechanisms for dealing with speaking anxiety, Kondo and Yang (2003) collected open-ended questionnaire responses from EFL students in Japan to obtain a broad sample of tactics for coping with language anxiety. Seventy tactics were identified and divided into five clusters, according to the hierarchical cluster analysis. They found that students use five main strategies for combating anxiety, namely, preparation, relaxation, positivity, peer-seeking behaviour (z students' willingness to look out for other students who seem to have similar anxiety) and resignation (i.e. minimising the impact of anxiety by refusing to face the problem).

Table 2 Student responses to 'What strategies do you use to minimise your anxiety when speaking English in class?'

Participant	Response at T1	Strategies used at T1	Response at T2	Strategies used at T2
1	'I rely on parental support and review textbooks and workbook exercises'.	Preparation Self-encouragement	'I learn vocabulary and grammar from a handbook to be able to express myself'.	Preparation
2	'I learn vocabulary and sentences and rely on L1 if necessary while speaking in groups'.	Preparation Self-encouragement Peer seeking	'I spend time practising reading comprehension- mainly translation-and grammar to bridge gaps in missing information'.	Preparation
3	'I listen to English via an online study application, learn vocabulary with a picture dictionary, and rely on L1 if necessary in speaking'.	Preparation Self-encouragement	'I focus on reading comprehension with translation to express myself in a group'.	Preparation Peer seeking
4	'I focus on practising sample sentences with peers, learning vocabulary with an English-English dictionary, and learning simple grammar rules'.	Preparation Peer seeking	'I write journals to learn vocabulary, grammar and sample sentences'.	Preparation
5	'I practise speaking aloud (responding quickly in group work)'.	Peer seeking	'As I focus on grammar, I end up with less listening time'.	Preparation
6	'I learn vocabulary and simple grammar with a picture dictionary'.	Preparation	'I focus on writing journals, working in my grammar workbook and reading to become accustomed to L2 language structure'.	Preparation
7	'I spend time working on a project with peers and take part in an out-of-classroom online course for speaking practice'.	Self-encouragement Peer seeking	'I learn vocabulary from a vocabulary handbook and practise grammar in extracurricular classes to avoid negative peer feedback in group interactions'.	Preparation Self-encouragement Peer seeking

8	'I listen to English podcasts and practise speaking, and I prepare for group work'.	Self-encouragement Peer seeking	'I prepare for working on group work and depend on L1 in group/pair work'.	Self-encouragement Peer seeking
9	'I do my homework every day and practise speaking via online lessons'.	Preparation Self-encouragement	'I prepare for working in groups by reviewing daily work and practising sample sentences for responding quickly'.	Peer seeking
10	'I learn vocabulary with a picture dictionary and practise grammar in extracurricular classes to avoid negative peer feedback in group interactions'.	Preparation Self-encouragement Peer seeking	'I depend on L1 to avoid being embarrassed by non-participation'.	Self-encouragement Peer seeking
11	'I read text with corresponding audio to become accustomed to the language'.	Self-encouragement	'I focus on short daily reading comprehension tests to build self-esteem. Group work encourages my study'.	Self-encouragement Peer seeking
12	'I spend time working in my grammar workbook, practising vocabulary and listening to audio (visualising images without translation)'.	Preparation Self-encouragement	'I learn vocabulary with a handbook, and I learn writing (getting used to language structure) with my reading comprehension workbook'.	Preparation
13	'I practise listening and visualise images without translating L2 into L1. I practise comprehension, interaction and vocabulary with picture books'.	Preparation Self-encouragement	'I am reasonably happy with comprehension through listening, so grammar-based learning is my concern. Practising sample sentences to respond quickly also helps'.	Preparation
14	'I use L2 as much as I can as it is much clearer, and I practise L2 by visualising images while listening'.	Self-encouragement	'I try to visualise images while reading (not translating L2 into L1)'.	Self-encouragement
15	'I listen and visualise images. I do not translate everything into L1 but I use L1 if necessary'.	Self-encouragement	'I practise speaking inside/ outside the class to learn how to respond properly'.	Self-encouragement
16	'I contribute what I can when I interact in a group'.	Peer seeking	'I focus on daily reading comprehension using my workbook'.	Preparation

Note. T1: Time 1, May 2016; T2: Time 2, May 2017

Table 2-1 The number of student responses for the reduction strategy 'What strategies do you use to minimise your anxiety when speaking English in class?'

Strategies used	Total number of responses at T1	Total number of responses at T2
Preparation	9	10
Self-encouragement	12	6
Peer seeking	7	6

Table 3 presents categories of methods that students used to reduce their anxiety and was created by the researcher on the basis of students' responses at T3. At T3, students indicated that in-class learning in Japan covered reasonable listening skills, vocabulary and most intermediate grammar rules, which lessened their anxiety about speaking in a native-English-speaking country. The study abroad programme emboldened students to adopt different lifestyles, mindsets and values while interacting with host families, Australian schoolmates, teachers and friends. Although students became accustomed to the daily conversation and forming short sentences (A2-B1-level as per CEFR), they believed that additional interactive pre-programme activities, including extensive listening, vocabulary expansion, and grammar practice would have helped them express their thoughts more clearly and accurately, making conversations more meaningful and relaxed and increasing confidence while speaking. Furthermore, students found that their positivity and flexibility were valuable assets for building strong relationships and resulted in being more involved and flexible in the act of speaking.

Table 3 Student responses to 'How did your classroom English-speaking practice help you-control your speaking anxiety during the study abroad programme?'

Method to reduce speaking anxiety	Participants who reported using this method	Sample responses at T3
Making short sentences	1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16	'I concentrated on making simple conversation'. (2) 'Relative clause sentences could not be used during conversation; this was disappointing'. (5)
*Intermediate grammar practice		'Learning grammar can be essential for making more natural conversation'. (8)
*Reasonable vocabulary		'I wish I knew more vocabulary and grammar rules'. (12)
*Interaction		'I tried but could not make longer sentences'. (13)
Using simple tenses	3, 4, 7, 11, 15	'I tried to be careful using tenses in speaking'. (4) 'I realised I should be careful when speaking in the past, present and future tenses when host parents did not understand what I was saying, which at least I did'. (7)
*Intermediate grammar practice		'Focusing on the present and past tenses helped my speaking'. (11)
*Listening		'Listening was challenging, but the grammar was not a serious problem because we spent a great deal of time learning it in school'. (3, 15)
Focusing on target learning; L2, L1	1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 10	'Thinking things in L1 and translating them into L2 confused my speaking'. (2)
*Logical thinking		'Explaining things logically was difficult'. (1)
*Performance-based assessment		'Getting used to performance-based assessments helped in class'. (4) 'It was easy to set my own goals about speaking every day'. (5) 'Performance-based assessments always helped performance'. (9)

*Clear learning objectives		'Accompanying scoring rubrics were helpful—it was easy to focus on preparing for presentations'. (10)
Being positive in many ways	6	'I tried to be positive in many ways during the programme'.
Spending time with people	7, 8	'Interacting with the host family (attributed partially to the English-speaking interactive group activities conducted during the class before the trip) gradually made me feel sure of my speaking'. (7) 'Meeting many people on campus and talking about likes and dislikes helped'. (8)
Interaction; listening and speaking in simple English	2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 16	'The host father always talked to me'. (2) 'Asking for help regularly made things better every day'. (4) 'I asked for the host mother's help with assessments, as my vocabulary comprehension was lacking'. (7) 'Getting to know my buddy and daily conversation helped me learn vocabulary'. (8)
*Reasonable listening and vocabulary		'I interacted extensively with the host parents, although most of this was unclear because of my limited listening or vocabulary (I eventually stopped translating, as it became hard to catch up over time)'. (9) 'I went out often with the host family, so I became accustomed to 60% of their speech'. (10) 'While I couldn't understand all details when listening, I could discern whether something was important'. (11) 'It was not easy to follow the English of my buddy's friends'. (12)
*Grammar practice		'I had trouble understanding most of the English, so focusing on listening, specifically catching subjects and verbs, helped'. (13) 'Watching TV helped me regain my confidence in listening'. (14)
*Self-learning for own stimulation		'Self-learning, including active, out-of-classroom learning, through meeting and speaking with different people, pushed me forward'. (15) 'I met and talked with people on campus'. (16)
Understanding conversation roughly	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8 9, 10, 11, 14	'There was a realisation of the limitation of vocabulary/reading comprehension at the CEFR A2-B1 level, but I got by nonetheless'.
Talking about academic topics	1, 3, 4, 9, 10, 14, 15	'Describing Japan and my background was an achievement although it was hard to read and understand children's books as they had so many unknown adjectives and verbs'. (1, 3, 4, 9, 10, 14) 'Learning with my buddy helped me learn history and science in class'. (15)

Note. L1 = first language; L2 = second language; T3: Time 3, March 2018

*Semi-targets for each method to reduce speaking anxiety.

Discussion

Learning strategies to combat speaking anxiety

This study was conducted to investigate eighth- and ninth-grade students' strategies for addressing their speaking anxiety and to explore whether it is possible to control anxiety regarding speaking English at the stage of foreign language instruction or through curriculum setting and improvement to the environment. We analysed students' responses to determine if they used any of the five main strategies identified in Kondo and Yang's (2003) study (i.e. preparation, relaxation, positivity, peer-seeking behaviour and resignation), and the results indicated that the students used three of these strategies (i.e. preparation, positivity and peer-seeking behaviour).

Preparation

For students in the seventh and eighth grades, their daily learning consists largely of listening and speaking practice. In the ninth grade, students study grammar-based reading and practise speaking. Table 2 shows that learning vocabulary and simple English rules, listening, and using L2 were major coping mechanisms at T1. At T2, students depended on learning vocabulary through reading and practising grammar to help minimise their anxiety.

At T1, in their learning, students used the bottom-up strategies (Richards, 2008) to learn English by examining individual meanings or the grammatical characteristics of a text. Bottom-up learning was gradually replaced by top-down learning, whereby students deduced, interpreted and used background information to predict the meaning of the language (Zimmerman, 2008). Students who used background information to predict the meaning of the language they are going to listen to or read appeared to enjoy their English lessons. Half of the students expressed English-speaking anxiety, but this may have been due to uncertainty or hesitation (Table 1). At T2, students reported that their worry and uncertainty had increased when compared with the previous year, but they had improved their comprehension by learning words via an English picture dictionary. Moreover, they used L2 in class but could switch to L1 if necessary, which helped them enjoy and be more optimistic about speaking English (Table 3).

However, ninth-grade students did not use the picture or English-English dictionaries, and they spoke L2 less than in eighth grade. Instead, they learnt L2 grammar using bottom-up strategies. Krashen (2003) noted that we acquire language and develop literacy when we understand messages. Consequently, the change to using a bottom-up strategy controlled their learnt knowledge processing and helps them bridge information gaps and reduce speaking difficulties.

Peer-seeking behaviour

The present study also found that peer support in group work motivated students to work and speak (Table 2). Peer-seeking behaviour is characterised by students' willingness to look out for other students who seem to be having trouble controlling their anxiety and to be a source of emotional regulation. Ozeki and Shirai (2010) found that students felt more comfortable about making mistakes in group activities since they would be corrected by their peers. The participants in the present study occasionally experienced irritation or embarrassment in group settings, but friends' support encouraged them to take

risks and attempt speaking in more complex situations. Improving themselves through friendly rivalry also seemed to motivate students to learn L2 words and rules and improve their reading and speaking (Tables 2 and 3).

Positivity

Table 3 shows that students found listening in the eighth grade and grammar-based reading in the ninth grade made them feel more comfortable and confident in speaking. The results in Tables 2 and 3 show that students had more anxiety when they felt that they had not devoted time to listen to English at home. Nevertheless, the focus on listening comprehension in the eighth grade was reflected in the ninth graders' listening comprehension skills during the study abroad programme. Furthermore, Table 3 indicates that students were providing more extensive responses to their host families, perhaps because they were performing mental visualisation; they ought to think in English rather than translating it to Japanese unless the expression was complicated (Table 2).

The use of performance-based assessments (Daniels, 2002; Day et al., 2002) also seemingly positively affected how comfortable students were when speaking (Table 3). The data indicate that having clear learning objectives and simplifying complex tasks are relevant strategies for enhancing performance and avoiding uncertainty. This can result in positivity, which can divert problematic thought processes in stressful situations and allow students to focus better and enjoy themselves.

According to Table 2-1, students' responses determined that they used three of the five main strategies identified in Kondo and Yang's (2003) study: how students cope with their anxiety in language classrooms. Students reported that they did not emphasise using relaxation strategies at T1 and T2 involving tactics that aim to reduce somatic anxiety symptoms (Kondo & Yang, 2003), nor were they reluctant to take steps to alleviate their language anxiety by controlling the source of anxiety.

Learning strategies developed during the short-term study abroad programme

Two subsections that students had not used in Japan were found during their short-term study abroad programme. They were 'to be aware of functioning students' who were learning in real life and 'self-management'.

Awareness of learning strategy as a positive sign (making sure of the right performance)

In this study's chosen Japanese school, the admissions department compiled data that suggested that ninth-grade students who had experienced the new curriculum of 2013 complained less about what they had learnt than the previous years, despite experiencing communication difficulties and language-related misunderstandings during the programme (MEXT, 2013). This may be due to the new framework, which emphasised communication activities, reflecting the policy at MEXT (2008a), which seems to be the relevant development in effectively combating speaking anxiety and motivating students in Japan to be positive about their learning.

Self-management

The responses to the first question show that the students felt more comfortable speaking English after the study abroad programme. Students reported that learning strategies helped reduce worrying

during the programme, but linguistic deficiencies and English sentences that were hard to understand at natural speed had to be addressed by spending time with native English speakers. The students pointed to explicit instructions by EFL teachers, host parents and their buddies as helping avoid uncertainty, thus preserving their self-confidence. Such instructions further cultivated students' self-management skills, allowing them to focus on the elements that they were expected to explore or provide simple answers for and this helped students collaborate with Australian students in class.

The participants identified their friendships abroad as being important factors that influence their anxiety. Studies have indicated that students' self-confidence improves through the influence of friends (Nalavany & Carawan, 2012). Better social adjustment helped free their minds and increases their confidence in self-expression in L2.

During the programme, some Australian coordinators reported that host families perceived Japanese students as somewhat quiet but positive in interactions. As some students were frustrated with their ineffective communication (consistent with their interview reports), they sometimes worked before or after dinner to prepare translations for school. However, students learnt that translations were not time-efficient, as perfect grammar was not always necessary to convey meaning. Over time, they spent less time translating and more time actively practising English during family activities and while performing their routines. This positive attitude influenced their work and interactions, and when they returned to school in Japan at T3, most of the students indicated that they were happy with their speaking performance (Table 1). MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) suggested that anxiety affects learning and a learner's conversation-related success or failure. Developing positive attitudes could motivate the use of L2 significantly to help students practise English and reinforce what they already know.

Conclusion

This study investigated the strategies that 15-year-old Japanese participants used to overcome English-speaking anxiety for over 2 years, including after a short-term study abroad programme. That is to say, it elucidated whether it is possible to eliminate anxiety about speaking English at the stage of foreign language instruction or the stage of curriculum setting and environment improvement. The results of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions show that language practice measures complemented daily learning processes in that we believe we can make important proposals based on what teachers should be aware of in education. Students coped with anxiety using multiple strategies, including peer-seeking behaviour, positive thinking and preparation at the stage of foreign language instruction. It was also revealed that curriculum setting, environment improvement and experiencing a different culture helped cultivate additional strategies to combat their speaking anxiety.

Generalisability may be a limitation of the present study, given that all of the participants were Japanese eighth- and ninth-grade students from one school. To fully understand coping mechanisms for anxiety among L2 students and how their learning strategies, thinking and idea-sharing abilities might be shifted, future research should be conducted in other areas and include students from other grades.

The current findings could aid in the development of effective programmes to enhance English

communication and reduce speaking anxiety among L2 learners.

References

- Aspinall, R. W. (2006). Using the paradigm of 'small cultures' to explain policy failure in the case of foreign language education in Japan. *Japan Forum*, 18(2), 255-274.
- Bensalem, E. (2018). Multilingualism and foreign language anxiety: The case of Saudi EFL Learners. <https://doi.org/10.18538/lthe.v15.n2.314>
- Bensalem, E., & Thompson, A. S. (2021). Multilingual effects on EFL learning: A comparison of foreign language anxiety and self-confidence experienced by bilingual and multilingual tertiary students. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 1-15.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57-71). American Psychological Association.
- Cutrone, P. (2009). Overcoming Japanese EFL learners' fear of speaking. *Language Studies Working Papers*, 1, 55-63.
- Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups* (2nd ed.). Stenhouse.
- Day, J. P., Spiegel, D. L., McLellan, J., & Brown, V. B. (2002). *Moving forward with literature circles*. Scholastic.
- Dewaele, J. M., & Al Saraj, T. (2015). Foreign language classroom anxiety of Arab learners of English: The effect of personality, linguistic and sociobiographical variables. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 5(2), 205-230.
- Djigunovic, J. M. (2006). Language anxiety and language processing. In S. H. Foster-Cohen, M. M. Krajnovic and J. M. Djigunovic (Eds.), *EUROSLA Yearbook 6*, pp. 191-212.
- Dordinejad, F. G., & Ahmadabad, R. M. (2014). Examination of the relationship between foreign language classroom anxiety and English achievement among male and female Iranian high school students. *Int. J. Language Learn. Appl. Linguistics World*, 6(4), 446-460.
- Doyon, P. (2000). Shyness in the Japanese EFL class: Why it is a problem, what it is, what causes it, and what to do about it. *The Language Teacher*, 24(1), 11-16.
- Farrell, C. (2000). English teacher development: Top-down, bottom-up or both? *Teaching and Learning*, 21(1), 27-35.
- Hashimoto, Y. (2002). Motivation and willingness to communicate as predictors of L2 Use: The Japanese ESL context. *Second Language Studies*, 20(2), 29-70.
- He, X., Zhou, D., & Zhang, X. (2021). An empirical study on Chinese university students' English language classroom anxiety with the idiodynamic approach. *SAGE Open*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211037676>
- Hinkel, E. (2006). Current perspectives on teaching the four skills. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1), 109-131.
- Horwitz, E. K. (2001). Language anxiety and achievement. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21(1), 112-126. <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190501000071>
- Kitano, K. (2001). Anxiety in the college Japanese language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 85, 549-566.
- Kondo, D. S., & Yang, Y. L. (2003). English language classroom anxiety scale: Test construction, reliability, and validity. *JALT Journal*, 25(2), 593-598.
- Krashen, S. (2003). *Explorations in language acquisition and use: The Taipei lectures*. Heinemann.
- Kunt, N., & Tümm, D. Ö. (2010). Non-native student teachers' feelings of foreign language anxiety. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2(2), 4672-4676.
- Liu, M. (2006). Anxiety in Chinese EFL students at different proficiency levels. *System*, 34, 301-316.
- Liu, M. (2007). Anxiety in oral English classrooms: A case study in China. *Indonesian Journal of English Language*

- Teaching*, 3(1), 119-137.
- Liu, M., & Hong, M. (2021) English language classroom anxiety and enjoyment in Chinese young learners. *SAGE Open*, 11(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211047550>.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1989). Anxiety and second language learning: Toward a theoretical clarification. *Language Learning*, 39(2), 251-275. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1989.tb00423.x>
- Ministry of Education, Culture Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). (1998). The educational system in Japan: Case study findings. Chapter 3 Individual differences in the Japanese education system. <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/JapanCaseStudy/chapter3d.htm>
- MEXT. (2008a). *Chūgakkō gakushū shidō yōryō kaisetsu: Gaikoku-go-hen* [The guide to course of study: Foreign language]. Kairyudo.
- MEXT. (2008b). *Chūgakkō gakushū shidō yōryō eiyaku ban: Gaikoku-go* [Tentative English translation of the guide to course of study: Foreign language]. <http://www.mext.go.jp/>
- MEXT. (2013). *The state of international exchange in high schools*. Tokyo: MEXT. http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/25/04/1332931.htm
- Oflaz, A. (2019). The effects of anxiety, shyness and language learning strategies on speaking skills and academic achievement. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 8(4), 999-1011. <https://doi.org/10.12973/eu-jer.8.4.999>
- Ozeki, H., & Shirai, Y. (2010). Semantic bias in the acquisition of Japanese relative clauses. *Journal of Child Language*, 37, 197-215. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0305000909009489>
- Richards, J. (2008). *Teaching speaking and listening*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sampson, R. J. (2015). Absorbed expectations about English study of adolescent Japanese students: Insights into the ought-to L2 self. *The Language Teacher*, 39, 3-8.
- Shillaw, J. (2017). Language Testing @55: A review of 55 years of foreign language assessment. *Academia: Literature and Language*, 101, 1-14.
- Tanveer, M. (2007). Investigation of the factors that cause language anxiety for ESL/EFL learners in learning speaking skills and the influence it casts on communication in the target language. Investigation of the factors that cause language anxiety for ESL/EFL learners in learning speaking skills and the influence it casts on communication in the target language. Master's Thesis, University of Glasgow.
- Thompson, A. S., & Khawaja, A. J. (2015). Foreign language anxiety in Turkey: The role of multilingualism. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 1-16.
- Thompson, A. S., & Lee, J. (2012). Anxiety and EFL: Does multilingualism matter? *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 16, 730-749. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2012.713322>
- Vetenskapsrådet. (2002). *Forskningsetiska principer inom humanistisk-samhällsvetenskaplig forskning* [Ethical principles of research in the humanistic and social sciences]. Vetenskapsrådet.
- Williams, K. E., & Andrade, M. R. (2008). Foreign language learning anxiety in Japanese EFL university classes: causes, coping, and locus of control. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 5(2), 181-191.
- Zhiping, D., & Paramasivam, S. (2013). Anxiety of speaking English in class among international students in a Malaysian university. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 1(11), 1-16.
- Zimmerman, B. J. (2008). Investigating self-regulation and motivation: Historical background, methodological developments and future prospects. *American Educational Research Journal*, 45, 166-183.