

## Potential Sources of Anxiety for Japanese Learners of English: Preliminary Case Interviews with Five Japanese College Students in the U.S.

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### Abstract

This study explores the nature of language anxiety from the perspective of five Japanese learners of English (ESL), especially in reference to their self-reflective accounts of emotional difficulties encountered in the U.S. college settings. Through the use of an in-depth qualitative interview format, this study attempts to identify potential sources of anxiety relevant to their affective needs or concerns as Japanese ESL learners in a cross-cultural learning environment. As the interview findings indicate, characteristics of language anxiety exhibited by the participants seem to be quite influenced by Japanese cultural norms or expectations acquired through numerous socialization processes in Japan. Using Young's (1991) six sources of language anxiety as a theoretical guideline for data collection and analysis, this study also discusses some of the influences or impact of those anxiety-provoking factors on L2 learning, along with some implications for further research on language anxiety and for ESL teaching.

### Introduction

The issue of anxiety in L2 learning has been widely recognized for its significant impact on the L2 learners. This is especially so in the various socio-cultural contexts in which they are required to express themselves in a language of which they have little command (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre, 1999; Young, 1991). Although language anxiety is sometimes viewed as a helpful "energizer" for approach such complex tasks as L2 learning, the potentially harmful effects of anxiety, often called "debilitating anxiety" (Brown 1994), cannot be easily dismissed in the context of L2 teaching.

Language anxiety, a type of anxiety specifically associated with L2 learning contexts, can arise from many kinds of sources, according to the learners' individually unique frame of reference (Skehan, 1989; Young, 1991). The language classroom setting, for instance,

naturally presents itself as an anxiety-provoking situation to some learners, as it often involves constant evaluations from others as well as from the learner him/herself. In such an environment, chances of being evaluated might serve as a reminder of the learner's current L2 competence in comparison to others' or idealized images of him/herself as a successful language learner (Eharman, 1996). As Horwitz et al. (1986) clearly note, "[A]ny performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic" (p. 128).

In the recent L2 teaching context, one of the greatest challenges for ESL/EFL teachers is to provide students with a learner-centered, low-anxiety, and comfortable classroom environment. In their efforts to create such an environment, the issue of student anxiety and its consequent negative effects on L2 learning and performance seems to pose a challenge to all language teachers, as it can potentially hamper the optimal learning and teaching from taking place in the classroom. Thus, our first and foremost important task as ESL/EFL teachers is to have a better understanding of the nature of student anxiety in terms of when, where, how, and why students feel anxious, before addressing effective ways of anxiety reduction (Spiellmann & Radnofsky, 2001).

Although the phenomenon itself has been investigated as it correlates to other instructional variables, aiming to find a measurable impact of student affect on achievement or proficiency, research has not yet fully described the nature of language anxiety, or its potential sources that underlie its manifestations (Young, 1991). In order to gain a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon, experiences of language anxiety need to be explored and described from multiple perspectives and approaches (Young, 1992). In light of the complex, multidimensional nature of language anxiety, one of the conceivable approaches, as yet to be tapped, is to examine the nature of language anxiety through describing affective experiences of particular individuals or a group of L2 learners who share the same cultural background.

This study, thus, presents an attempt to provide some alternative insights into the nature of language anxiety from a cultural viewpoint. Descriptive accounts of language anxiety experiences through the cultural lens of particular L2 learners can shed some light on the role of L1 culture in the affective sides of second language learning, especially as to its potential impact on the ways of perceiving and interpreting the phenomenon of language anxiety.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to describe and explore the nature of language learning anxiety from the perspective of five Japanese learners of English (ESL), especially in reference to their self-reflective accounts of emotional difficulties encountered in the U.S. college settings. Through the use of in-depth qualitative interview format, this study attempts to identify potential sources of anxiety as relevant to their affective needs or concerns specific to the contexts of their L2 learning and performance. Using Young's (1991) six sources of language anxiety as a theoretical guideline for data collection and analysis, I would also like to discuss some of the influences or impact of those

anxiety-provoking factors on L2 learning, along with some implications for further research on language anxiety and for ESL teaching.

## **Objectives**

1. To identify and describe what kinds of anxiety that Japanese learners of English feel in the L2 learning and performance, including when and how they feel so.
2. To explore potential sources of their anxiety, by focusing on social and cultural influences on their anxiety formation.
3. To discuss the roles of anxiety in L2 learning, along with the roles of ESL teachers in response to the identified student anxieties.

## **Conceptualization of Language Learning Anxiety**

Anxiety, generally defined as "a state of apprehension, a vague fear" (Scovel, 1978, p. 134), seems difficult to describe in a simple and exhaustive manner, as it arises from many kinds of sources often associated with particular contexts or situations that individuals perceive threatening according to their unique frame of reference (Eharman, 1996). Previous anxiety research suggests that there are roughly two types that can be experienced at different psychological levels (Spielberger, 1983; Levitt, 1980; Schwarzer, 1986). At the deepest--or global--level, anxiety is viewed as a permanent trait, as some people are predisposed to be anxious. At a more local or situational level, anxiety can be experienced in response to a particular situation or act (Brown, 1994). However, the question of how these constructs relate to second language learning contexts is still under debate, although several interpretations of language anxiety are offered in terms of situational nature of state anxiety (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991a).

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), the first to conceptualize language anxiety as a psychological construct particular to language learning, language anxiety can be characterized as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). Similarly, MacIntyre (1999) argues for the situation-specific nature of language anxiety, viewing it as a unique type of anxiety or "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning a second language" (p. 27). Previous studies by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989, 1991b) found that performance in the second language was negatively correlated with language anxiety, but not with more general forms of anxiety. That is, a total of 23 different anxiety scales were clustered into three categories of anxieties by using a statistical method called factor analysis:

1. The first category or "factor" was found to include most of the anxiety scales (i.e., measures of trait anxiety, communication apprehension, interpersonal anxiety and so on) and was then labeled "General anxiety" or "Social Evaluation Anxiety";
2. The second factor was found to be State Anxiety (e.g. Novelty Anxiety, the physical danger scale, etc.), and
3. The third factor was labeled Language Anxiety, for it was composed of two measures of French test anxiety, French use anxiety, and French classroom anxiety.

Such results of factor analysis clearly indicated that language anxiety could be separated from other forms of anxiety, as evidenced by the procedure of factor analysis that specified no correlations among the factors.

### **Interpretations of Language Anxiety: Its componential sources**

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), language anxiety, a distinct phenomenon particular to language learning, comprises three componential sources, especially in relation to various kinds of L2 activities that the learners perform in the classroom: 1) communication apprehension, 2) test anxiety, and 3) fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension, which generally refers to a type of anxiety experienced in interpersonal communicative settings (McCroskey, 1987), is relevant to second/foreign language learning contexts. Especially in the language classroom where the learners have little control of the communicative situation and their performance is constantly monitored by both their teacher and peers (Horwitz et al., 1986), communication apprehension seems to be augmented in relation to the learner's negative self-perceptions caused by the inability to understand others and make oneself understood (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991c).

Such feelings of apprehension that second/foreign language communicative contexts induce often accompany fear of negative evaluation from others. Watson and Friend (1969) characterize it as "apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectations that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (p. 448). As Gardner and MacIntyre (1993, p. 5) also note, such feelings of apprehension can be characterized by "derogatory self-related cognition, feelings of apprehension, and physiological responses such as increased heart rate." Even in small group discussions, for instance, some learners might feel anxious for fear of negative evaluation from their peers, possibly resulting in being quiet and reticent, contrary to their initial intention to participate. Such psychological dilemmas of L2 learners between willingness to speak up in the classroom and fear of losing their self-esteem in front of others seems to be a ubiquitous phenomenon in second/foreign language classroom settings (Bailey, 1983; Cohen & Norst, 1989).

Another conflict within L2 learners, which may attribute to their unrealistic expectations or beliefs on language learning and achievement, can often be instantiated as frustration or anger toward their own poor performance on language tests. Although many students are afraid of tests in general, those who are required to take them in a foreign/second language might feel more pressure, challenged by the fact that they need to recall and coordinate many grammar points at the same time during the limited test period. As a result, they may put down the wrong answer or simply "freeze up" due to nervousness, even if they know the correct answer (Price, 1991; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

According to Tobias (1979, 1980, 1986), anxiety may work as a mental block to cognitive performance at all three cognitive stages: Input, Processing, and Output. In other words, anxiety arousal, which is typically associated with self-deprecating thoughts, fear of failure, or worry over performance procedures, may compete for cognitive resources that normal cognitive processing will demand. Because the capacity for information

processing is limited, when combined with anxiety related self-thoughts, the mental processing is naturally overloaded to the extent that language performance is impaired (Eysenck, 1979). Moreover, even superior students who are excessively concerned about their performance may become so anxious that they attempt to compensate by studying even harder (e.g., in the form of "overstudying," Horwitz et al., 1986) because their compulsive efforts do not lead to their intended performance.

### **Potential Sources of Language Anxiety**

In relation to the performance anxieties mentioned above, Young (1991) also offers an extensive list of the potential sources of language anxiety through a review of the literature on language anxiety. In this article, the author discusses the six potential sources of language anxiety, some of which are associated with the learner, some with the teacher, and others with the instructional practice. She argues that language anxiety can arise from:

1. personal and interpersonal anxieties;
2. learner beliefs about language learning;
3. instructor beliefs about language teaching;
4. instructor-learner actions;
5. classroom procedures; and
6. language testing.

Although there are overlaps with the three performance anxieties, some of these six categories are worth examining here, because they are addressing still other critical issues that may underlie or affect the formation of student anxiety:

- a. socio-psychological issues of language anxiety,
- b. learner/instructor beliefs on language learning and teaching, and
- c. instructor-learner interactions/ classroom procedures.

### **Socio-psychological Issues of Language Anxiety**

Personal and interpersonal issues, the most commonly cited sources of language anxiety, have been investigated in conjunction with other social and psychological constructs such as self-esteem, competitiveness, group identity, or social discourse (Young, 1991; Price, 1991; Bailey, 1983; Horwitz, 1988). Bailey (1983) examined the relationship between the learners' competitiveness and self-esteem as a potential source of learner anxiety, claiming that competitive nature of L2 learning can lead to anxiety when learners compare themselves to others or to the idealized self-images. Krashen (1981) also suggests that anxiety can arise according to one's degree of self-esteem. For example, people with low self-esteem may worry what their peers or friends think, in fear of their negative responses or evaluation. According to Price (1991) and Hembree (1988), learners who perceive their level of proficiency to be lower than that of others in class are more likely to feel language anxiety. Thus, some of the performance anxieties mentioned earlier might be categorized broadly into one psychological construct, "social anxiety," proposed by Leary (1982). Leary defines social anxiety as "a type of anxiety that arises

from the prospect or presence of interpersonal evaluation in real or imagined social settings" (p. 102). Acknowledging the potential effects of social anxiety on L2 learning, Krashen (1985), with reference to his own hypothesis "Affective Filter Hypotheses," contends that the affective filter can be lowered when an individual learner considers himself to be a member of particular target language group, e.g., a member of the Spanish, Japanese "club" (as interviewed in Young, 1992, p. 167). Similarly, Terrell (as cited in Young, 1992) argues for Krashen's "group membership" theory by drawing on the social aspects of child L1 acquisition; as he suggests, "children acquire their first language and a second language in order to identify and be a member of the group that speaks that language" (p. 161). Thus, both Krashen and Terrell seem to hold a similar view of language anxiety, to the effect that language anxiety is closely related to the student's experience of "target language group identification."

Another socio-psychological construct suggested by Rardin in the interview is so-called "existential anxiety" (Young, 1992). According to her definition, existential anxiety refers to a more profound type of anxiety that is inherent to the language learning process as it "touches the core of one's self-identity, one's self image" (p. 168). In other words, this anxiety can arise in fear that learning another language might lead to the loss of one's identity.

Other psychological phenomena that can occur in the context of L2 learning include Schumann's concept of "social discourse" (1978), Clarke's theory of "clash of consciousness" (1976), and Guiora's "language ego" (1972). Those psychological phenomena, accompanied by low self-esteem and competitiveness, can become the seeds for student language anxiety, as often instantiated in the form of performance anxieties.

### **Learner/Instructor Beliefs on Language Learning and Teaching**

According to Young (1991), learner beliefs about language learning can contribute greatly to creating language anxiety in students. Gynan (1989) reports that some learners believe that pronunciation is the most important aspect of L2 learning, while others prefer other learning aspects, such as vocabulary, communication, traveling to a TL country, translation, or making friends.

A similar study on learner beliefs by Horwitz (1988) also presents various kinds of learner beliefs, suggesting that some of them are derived from the learner's unrealistic and sometimes erroneous conceptions about language learning. She found that

1. some learners were concerned about the correctness of their speech in comparison to native-like accent or pronunciation, that
2. some believed that two years of language learning is enough to achieve a native-like fluency, that
3. some expressed that language learning means learning how to translate, and that
4. some others believed that success of L2 learning limited to a few individuals who are gifted for language learning.

As is apparent from these results, it is quite conceivable that these unrealistic beliefs held

by learners can lead to anxiety in students, especially when their beliefs and reality clash. For example, if beginning learners believe that pronunciation is the single most important aspect of L2 learning, they will naturally get frustrated to find the reality of their imperfect speech even after a lot of practice. In this sense, learner beliefs can play another major role in forming language anxiety in students.

Instructor beliefs about language teaching can also become a source of creating language anxiety among L2 learners. The teacher's assumption on the role of language teachers may not always correspond to the student's needs or expectations toward the teacher. For example, when a teacher believes that his role in class is to constantly correct students' errors, some of the students might become quite anxious about their class performance.

### **Instructor-Learner Interactions/ Classroom Procedures**

Although many learners feel that some error correction is necessary (Koch & Terrell, 1991; Horwitz, 1988), the manner of error correction is often cited as provoking anxiety. Those studies that investigated anxieties in relation to instructor-learner interactions show that students are more concerned about how (i.e., when, what, where, or how often, etc.) their mistakes are corrected rather than whether error correction should be administered in class. In addition, some of the classroom activities, such as oral presentations or oral skits in front of the class are also listed as potential sources of anxiety (Young, 1991). She found that 68 percent of her subjects reported uncomfortable feelings in speaking in front of the class.

From the research on anxiety presented above, we can conclude that language anxiety that students feel in their various L2 activities cannot be defined in a linear manner (Skehan, 1989), but rather that it might be better construed as a complex, psychological phenomenon influenced by many different factors. Thus, it seems to be more appropriate to investigate language anxiety from a variety of perspectives or approaches (Young, 1992).

### **Interviews**

Based on the six potential sources of anxiety proposed by Young (1991), I asked participants several questions in terms of when, how, and why they would feel anxiety in their L2 learning and performance. I also used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) devised by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), mainly for initiating and facilitating our conversations in the interviews, but not for measuring the degree or range of the participants' anxiety. Because the FLCAS was specifically designed to measure the student's foreign language anxiety, some of the questionnaire statements seemed unsuitable for this study, in the sense that many of the participants were not taking language classes and that their current learning situation was not in the context of EFL but ESL. Although these factors hindered direct use of this scale, many of the statements in FLCAS, which contained various L2 situations that may provoke anxiety in students, were useful for eliciting comments from the participants, and also for generating further questions in the subsequent interviews.

## **Structure of Interviews**

### **Interview 1 (1st meeting)**

1. I collected personal data for each of the participants (i.e., name, address, age, major, year in college, etc.) along with their L2 learning backgrounds (i.e., educational background, the length of learning English, current situations in which they learn English etc).
2. I provided with each participant general explanations of the purpose of the study.
3. I asked general questions about their anxiety by using some of the statements from the FLCAS test. Such questions were: "Do you think you are an anxiety-prone person or not?", "Have you ever felt any anxiety or nervousness both in and outside of the classrooms?", "If so, when did you feel that way?", or "How did that feeling affect your physical and psychological well-being?"

### **Interview 2**

1. Based on the general information obtained through the first interview session, I asked the participants more focused questions in reference to the Young's six potential sources of anxiety. Such questions are concerned with several aspects of individual differences and how those differences can affect their anxiety formation.
2. I asked them to write a short journal on anything they felt stressful or anxious in their daily lives (optional).

### **Interview 3 (Optional)**

I asked some of them further specific questions generated by the previous two interview sessions.

## **Description of Research Participants**

### **Five Japanese College Students Enrolled in IUP (Indiana University of Pennsylvania)**

Three (participants A, H, and S) are undergraduate students majoring in Computer Science, Journalism, and Art, respectively. Two (participants F and T) are graduate students, whose majors are English and Adult Communication. All participants shared almost the same educational background in terms of the length of learning English (8 to 10 years), except for differing lengths of current stay in the United States. Age differences ranged from 20 to 36 years old. Their own estimate on the ratio of Japanese and English use within a week was approximately 8 (Japanese): 2 (English) on average. For convenience, I used a pseudo-initial for each participant (See the [Appendix](#) for detailed descriptions of each participant).

## **Interview Results and Analysis**

### **Common Types of Anxiety and their Potential Anxiety Sources**



1. Fear of Negative Evaluation/ Fear of Losing Face in Front of Others
2. Lack of Self-confidence in their English Proficiency and the Subject Matter
3. Competitiveness
4. Test Anxiety
5. Culturally Fixed Beliefs about Learning and Learning Procedures

### **Variability among the Participants**

1. Personality Differences
2. Age Differences
3. Levels of English Proficiency
4. Different Purposes of Learning English (e.g., different majors)
5. Different Attitudes toward Learning Languages
6. Different Amounts of Anxiety to 4 English Language Skills

### **Commonalities among the Participants**

#### **1. Fear of Negative Evaluation/ Fear of Losing Face in Front of Others**

All of the participants expressed serious concerns about various kinds of evaluative situations in which their knowledge and performance of English were to be monitored by people around them. Many of them commented on the classroom situation in a negative manner, saying that they would try to avoid eye contact with the teacher, fearing they would be called on to answer some questions in front of other students, even if they were sure of the topics being discussed. Participant T and F said that they would sometimes feel their hearts pounding or their palms sweat when they were asked to answer questions or elaborate on their comments in a convincing manner. Similarly, participant H and A expressed their severe psychological stress in the class presentations, as H argues:

While doing my presentation, I become so conscious about the facial expressions of other students and the teacher. If I notice they looked bored or confused, I feel my face blushed and go to a panic, and what is worse, I forget everything I have planned to say.

In relation to the fear of negative evaluation from others, fear of losing "face" in front of others was also found to be a shared anxious feeling by all of the five participants. Participant S and F said that they felt it embarrassing that their answers were criticized in front of other students.

#### **2. Lack of Self-confidence in their English Proficiency and the Subject Matter in Class**

Many seemed to agree upon the anxious feelings associated with their lack of English proficiency and their perceived lack of knowledge about the class subjects that they were studying. They expressed a deep concern about the difficulty communicating in English, compared to the ease of communication in Japanese.

Participant F and T related their frustrated feelings to their lack of English proficiency in comparison to their native language facility, as F clearly noted:

If I could speak and write in the same way as in Japanese, I wouldn't feel so nervous when asked to clarify my points in class. Even if I am quite familiar with the topic in my class discussion, I somehow tend to hesitate to comment on that, and after class I feel so bad about myself.

Some of them also expressed the same kind of frustration, but when their perceived lack of English proficiency was combined with their lack of knowledge or "unpreparedness" on the topics in question, they said they might feel even frightened to be in the classroom, as represented by Participant A's comment on his own behaviors in class: "I sometimes feel myself weird, remaining silent all through the class period with mysterious smiles on my face, and wishing that nobody would ask me any question."

### 3. Competitiveness

While acknowledging that there should inevitably be some elements of competition involved in language learning, many of the participants also noted that competitiveness could potentially lead to anxiety, depending on some particular situations or contexts. Certainly they are all concerned about their perceived poor performance in the class discussions or oral presentations, comparing themselves to the native competence of American classmates. However, their competitive focus seems more directed toward other international students, especially their Japanese peers. Participant F, for example, expressed his uneasy feelings in the classroom associated with his L2 performance in the presence of other Japanese students:

Well, I've never felt comfortable speaking English in front of my Japanese friends. That's very weird, and otherwise it seems like a competition of English proficiency! I do not necessarily want to compete with them, but I feel somewhat prompted to do so, because other American classmates might be evaluating our English at the same time. Sigh! I sometimes wish I could be the only Japanese in class.

Some of the other participants also shared similar feelings of uneasiness, often accompanied by the competitive pressure to perform well in English even outside of the classroom. Participant H revealed her covert competitiveness toward other Japanese students by referring to one of her episodes on campus:

Three of us, Mikiko, Yumi, and I were just chatting in front of the library after class when my American classmate joined our conversation. The moment we switched our language from Japanese into English, I sensed myself being so alert to my English for fear of making mistakes in front of my friends. Maybe I'm just too self-conscious of others' evaluative eyes, but sometimes I cannot help it. I don't usually find myself so competitive in Japanese but somehow in second language I am, though no one may know it but myself! I just don't want myself feel inferior to

others, especially when those others are the same Japanese as I am.

#### **4. Test Anxiety**

Most of the participants said that they feared taking tests, because test-taking situations would make them anxious about the negative consequences of getting a bad grade. This would lead to other psychological stresses, such as the fear of losing self-confidence or feeling inferior to others. In addition, they said they sometimes felt pressured to think that they had to organize their ideas in a short period of time (e.g., essay exams) while caring about grammar errors at the same time. Some of them expressed such anxious feelings, as Participant F:

The more I prepared for the exam, the more confused I got with so many things going on in my head. How could I organize my ideas in English in such a limited time! But if I couldn't make it in time, my efforts would be totally ruined!!

#### **5. Cultural Influence**

All the participants expressed the feelings of difficulty when they were pressed to change or adapt themselves to be fit into the American cultural standards. Because their behavioral patterns or belief systems shaped by their own social/cultural norms or expectations are so ingrained, they may have felt an acute frustration as to their inability to change their own behaviors, despite the immediate needs to acculturate into a new environment. For example, some of them said that they felt concerned about the role of students in class, "Should I volunteer to ask a question to the teacher in class? Should I reserve myself when I am not sure about what's going on in class? When should I interrupt into others talking?" Moreover, many of them shared the same feelings of difficulty in accommodating different classroom norms or expectations in the United States; for example, Participant S stated, "I'm so used to being self-reserved in class that I can not change myself overnight to become an assertive person in here." Similarly, Participant T noted:

If everyone in class seems to understand the topic in question, I cannot ask others or the teacher to explain it again, because if I do that, I might break the class atmosphere and stick out from others, which I feel the most fearful and intimidating.

### **Variability among the Participants**

#### **1. Personality Differences**

When asked such questions as "Are you predisposed to be fearful of many things?", "Do you perceive yourself as an anxiety-prone person or not?", or "Do you feel anxious because of your personality or because you are in any anxiety provoking situations?", some of the participants responded that their personality traits would have a tremendous impact on their attempts to deal with various L2 activities both in and outside of the classroom, while others characterized their anxiety as more

associated with the contexts of their L2 use, on the ground that any L2 activity, as they argued, could be inherently stressful and highly anxiety-providing. Participant A, T, and S, who judged themselves as anxiety-prone types, expressed their desire to change themselves to become more extroverted, outgoing, sociable, and assertive. However, the other two participants (F and H), who viewed themselves as rather extroverted in their native language (Japanese) or as less-anxious in expressing their opinions in front of others, responded to the questions above quite differently from those who judged themselves as anxiety-prone. Participant F expressed his willingness to speak English in public if he could, by saying, "I don't hesitate to express myself in Japanese even in front of the many audience, but because of my bad English, I simply cannot do so right now, which makes me frustrated!"

## **2. Age Differences**

There seemed to be some variations in the types of anxiety that they felt, depending on the age of each participant. Younger participants (A and H) expressed their anxious feelings for the communicative situations in which they were not sure of whether what they said was well understood by English native speakers. Participant H said, "I really worry about the facial reactions of native speakers, wondering if what I meant was properly communicated to them." On the other hand, however, older participants, S, F, and T, who are 28, 25, and 35 years of age, respectively, expressed more concern about the content of what they said in their classroom discussions or conversations with their American friends. Participant F, for example, said, "I know I can communicate with Americans fairly well in daily conversations, but I feel more pressure when I have to assert my points in an explicit and convincing way in class or class presentations."

## **3. Perceived Levels of English Proficiency**

Different levels of English proficiency perceived by the participants themselves seemed to create different kinds of anxiety among them. Participants S and A, whose proficiency level they judged to be low, expressed a concern about their constant grammatical mistakes. Participant S said, "I always try not to make any basic grammatical mistakes like third person singular '(e)s' or past tense marker 'ed', but once my focus of attention goes to these grammatical parts, I get confused myself about what I am trying to say." Other participants who judged their overall English proficiency as intermediate or pre-advanced said that although they would care about grammatical mistakes, they would become more concerned about their lack of vocabulary, their inability to choose appropriate words or expressions to the specific social contexts, especially when their performance was being monitored or evaluated by others.

## **4. Different Purposes of Learning English**

Although all the participants came to the United States highly motivated either intrinsically or extrinsically to become more proficient users of English, their specific purposes in learning English might have influenced the way they would feel anxiety in various L2 learning situations. Participant S, an art major, seemed to be

more concerned about how much she could convey to others in English rather than how well she could do so. She said, "I don't care about making grammatical mistakes, but I do care about whether others can understand what I really mean to say." Similarly, Participant A and T, whose purpose of learning English was more concerned with what they could do by using English rather than how proficient they would like to become, expressed their concern about the content of what they would say in English. On the other hand, participant H and F, whose majors were Journalism and English respectively, expressed much more concern about how proficient speakers of English they could become in comparison to the native standard; Participant F said, "Because I care too much about how well I should sound in English, I sometimes cannot concentrate on the content of my speech."

## **5. Different Attitudes toward Learning Language**

In relation to the different purposes for learning English, different attitudes toward learning English also seemed to contribute to creating different types of anxiety among the participants. Participant H, F, and S expressed a positive attitude toward learning English, as H argued, "I am trying to convince myself that because my English is just at the beginning level, it is quite natural for me to make mistakes and there is no use complaining about that." Other participants, however, maintained different views on learning English, as Participant A noted:

Understanding what is heard and read in English is crucial to my field of study, compared to speaking skills in English. So I feel anxious or worry all the more when I am asked to speak up in class and elaborate on my points further.

## **6. Different Amounts of Anxiety to 4 English Skills**

All the participants agreed that they would feel more anxiety when their speaking was monitored or evaluated by others, but there were some differences as to their levels of anxiety in relation to the other language skill areas (i.e., listening, writing, and reading). Three of them (S, H and A) expressed an uneasy feeling toward English writing and reading tasks because of their lack of vocabulary (reading) and knowledge of how to develop and organize their ideas (writing), while the other two participants said they would feel less anxiety in their writing and reading, because they said they could take as much time as they would want. As for listening skills, many of them seemed to share the feelings of difficulty, as represented in H's comment: "It depends on the situations, but I will feel anxiety for listening tasks, especially when some evaluation is involved or when all the other classmates seem to understand what is heard except me."

## **Discussion & Implications**

### **Contrast and Comparison to Young's Potential Sources of Anxiety**

By contrasting and comparing the results obtained from this study with the six potential sources of language anxiety summarized by Young (1991), there were both similarities and differences identified between them, reflecting a variety of different interpretations of anxiety expressed by each participant. The types of anxiety that the five participants of this study exhibited seem to neatly fit with some of the proposed anxiety sources by Young. For example, the types of anxiety and its sources, such as:

1. fear of negative evaluation or losing "face" in front of others,
2. lack of self-confidence in language proficiency and the subject matter, and
3. competitive situations

are all considered to be categorized into the personal and interpersonal anxieties. As mentioned earlier, since those types of anxiety have been the most commonly cited or discussed anxiety sources in the previous anxiety research, it seems reasonable to claim that much of language anxiety might be attributable to the issues of personal and interpersonal anxieties. Other similarities are that the participants expressed a deep concern or anxiety for test-taking situations, also found in Young's six sources of anxiety. Since test-anxiety can be viewed as a type of performance anxiety, it may also be categorized or reanalyzed into the personal and interpersonal anxieties in a broad sense. In other words, it might be speculated that actual or surface manifestations of student anxiety can be observed mostly in the forms of personal and interpersonal anxieties, which include specific types of performance anxiety such as test anxiety or communication apprehension (Horwitz et al. 1986).

However, it should also be noted that this broadly inclusive categorization could potentially conceal the real nature of student anxiety. As is apparent from the variability among the five participants in terms of the ways and the reasons that they feel anxiety, surface manifestations of student anxiety can be viewed as only a tip of the iceberg, supported by many other hidden factors below. Those factors are mainly derived from the individual differences among learners, such as different degrees of motivation toward language learning, different attitudes or beliefs about learning language skills, age differences, different learning styles or preferences, different cultural background etc. (Eharman, 1996; Skehan, 1989).

Specifically, there are potential sources that do not neatly fit into any of the Young's six categorizations. Those are:

1. culturally fixed beliefs about learning and its procedures,
2. different attitudes or motivation toward language learning,
3. personality differences,
4. perceived levels of English proficiency, and
5. age differences.

Indeed, each of these individual differences can independently constitute another potential source of language anxiety (Williams & Burden, 1997), but it seems more appropriate to view them as a set of dependent variables that might influence the actual formation of student anxiety. For example, learner beliefs about language learning can be better viewed as one of the composite variables influenced by many other different

factors or variables, such as culture, personality, learning styles, motivation/ attitudes toward learning, proficiency levels etc. The same is also true for the Young's (1991) category of personal and interpersonal anxieties.

### **The Role of Anxiety in their L2 Learning**

In relation to the discussion above, the types of anxiety shared among the five Japanese participants seem to generally correspond to the findings from previous research on student anxiety, except one thing. That is, the influence of cultural background on the formation of their anxiety. Commonly cited anxiety types, such as those of performance anxiety (i.e., communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test-anxiety) are typically found among all the five participants, but the level or degree of anxiety they felt seemed to be quite influenced by their Japanese cultural background as well (i.e., by the fact that they are all Japanese).

As some of the participants expressed in the interviews, culturally shaped behavioral patterns or beliefs are sometimes difficult to get rid of, despite constant conscious efforts to do so. In other words, it is such conscious efforts themselves that can place a tremendous burden on one's psychological well being, especially when expected to conform to the social and cultural norms of a target culture (Adler, 1987). Many of the participants expressed their willingness to change or adapt themselves so that they could follow the social norms or expectations in the United States, but their inability to do so successfully seems to make them more frustrated or anxious, to the extent that their self-esteem is negatively affected. In the various L2 activities that would often require them to perform certain tasks in front of others, their anxiety levels might be heightened, as they perceive the different student roles expected or desired in the U.S. and Japanese classrooms. The typical Japanese classroom norms, such as hesitating to express one's own ideas or opinions different from others, or trying not to be assertive in public, seem to be in stark contrast to American counterparts (Lebra & Lebra, 1986; Yoneyama, 1999), and those differences might prevent the maximum performance of the Japanese students in class.

Although there are some differences among the participants in the ways of perceiving language anxiety, depending on the age and personality of each participant, cultural influence on their anxiety formation seems to have a large and negative impact, at least on their L2 performance.

### **Implications for Further Research on Student Anxiety and for ESL Teaching**

This case study has revealed several characteristic sources of anxiety as relevant to other Japanese learners of English in the ESL contexts. Although, as the nature of case study suggests, the results can not be generalized to all the Japanese learners of English, the descriptions of anxiety types exhibited by five Japanese participants can provide some valuable implications for further research on student anxiety, along with some suggestions for ESL teaching.

As mentioned earlier, many of the potential sources of anxiety identified in this study

correspond to previous findings about student anxiety, especially as relevant to the several types of personal and interpersonal anxiety by Young (1991) as well as specific componential sources of performance anxiety by Horwitz et al. (1986). However, the findings of this study might also suggest some other interpretations from the following perspectives: cultural influence and individual differences.

1. Anxiety commonly exhibited by the participants may have been influenced by the Japanese socio-cultural norms or expectations that they acquired through their socialization processes in Japan.
2. Levels of anxiety that they actually feel in various L2 activities can vary, depending on the individually different attributes, such as personality differences, age differences, different proficiency levels, or different types of motivation toward language learning.

From these analyses, the following implications for ESL teaching can be drawn.

### **The Importance of the Teacher's Awareness of Individual Learner Differences**

Although it is almost impossible for the teachers to address all the learner differences including different cultural backgrounds, especially in the multi-cultural ESL settings as in the United States, it is still undoubtedly true that the teacher's awareness of the student's individual differences is indispensable in dealing with various kinds of student anxiety in a considerate manner (Oxford & Ehrman, 1993).

### **Cultural Awareness from both the Teacher and Students**

It is not only fear of making mistakes in a second language that can lead to anxiety. In some cultural contexts as in Japan, for instance, it is considered undesirable or unacceptable for talented students to stand out from their peers (Tsui, 1995). In other words, those learners who have internalized such culturally-based classroom norms might be afraid of not only losing their face for making mistakes but of being resented by their peers for outperforming others, thus violating acceptable cultural norms. This kind of anxious feeling might be unfamiliar to some ESL teachers, unless they share the same social/cultural norms with their students. But it should be recalled that the same feelings might also be felt among many ESL learners when they are asked to express their own opinions in class, for example. Thus, understanding of cultural differences from both the teacher's and students' sides should be encouraged, especially in a beginning level class, where the students might be vulnerable to a variety of different socio-cultural behaviors exhibited and also expected by the teacher him/herself as a representation of American classroom norms.

### **Conclusion**

The proclaimed goal of eliminating negative emotional elements from language learning is virtually impossible to achieve, or rather a misconception about the teacher's responsibility in the classroom. However, it is also undoubtedly true that the teachers'



supportive attitude toward student anxiety, along with continuous efforts to understand affective needs that each student brings to the classroom can make a significant contribution not only to creating a student-centered and comfortable classroom environment, but also to further facilitating the students' learning processes in the long run.

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## About the Author

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## Appendix: Student Profiles

### Participant H:

She is an undergraduate sophomore student majoring in Journalism and she came to the U.S. after finishing 2-year junior college (English major). While in her high-school days, she had an English tutor who was an American. Except that tutoring sessions, she said she had had little chance to speak in English in her daily life until she came to attend WUP. Her current use of English in the daily situations seems to be limited only to her classes and conversations with her roommate or friends for average 20 to 30 minutes per day, but she uses every weekend for her speaking practice with her native conversation partner (2 to 4 hours). Her own estimate on the speaking ratio of Japanese and English within a week was approximately 7 (Japanese): 3 (English).

### Participant A:

He is an undergraduate student majoring in Computer Science, and he has been here for about 3 years including attending an intensive English program in Indiana (1 year). He came to the U.S. after he quit his job in Japan 4 years ago. After high school, he went to a private English conversation school for a year while working daytime. He said he had almost no opportunity to speak or use English while in Japan, except an hour English conversation class a week. He estimated that his use of English in the current situation compared to that of Japanese would be 9 (Japanese): 1 (English).

### Participant F:

He is a graduate student majoring in English, and this is his second semester in the program. His undergraduate major was Economics and while in college, he took several English conversation classes taught by native English teachers but he said he had no chance to use English outside of those classes. Before he enrolled in the program, he attended an intensive English program in England for 3 months and also one in the U.S. for 4 months. His daily use of English speaking is limited to approximately 10 to 20 minutes on average but instead he spends 2 to 3 hours per day on reading and writing in English. His estimated ratio of English use (speaking) vs. Japanese was 8 (Japanese): 2

(English).

### **Participant T:**

He has been a graduate student majoring in Adult Education/Communication Technology for two years since he finished the intensive English program attached to WUP (1 and a half years). After finishing college in Japan, he worked for a printing company for 10 years before he came to the U.S. He said he had almost no chance to speak in English in those 10 years except one-hour English lesson he attended per week. His current situation is that he has a lot of American friends but he speaks quite little in English. Thus, his estimate of how much he uses Japanese vs. English in a week was 8 (Japanese): 2 (English).

### **Participant S:**

She is a graduate student majoring in Art Education, and this is her first semester in the program. Before enrolling in the graduate school, she attended the ALI (American Language Institute) for about 1 year. She worked for a graphic design company in Japan for 6 years before she came to the U.S. She said she had chances to speak in English in the workplace but those were limited only to greeting exchanges that would last for a few minutes. She estimated her daily use of English to be about 20 to 30 minutes, and compared to Japanese use, she said that was 8 (Japanese): 2 (English) weekly.

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