

Levels of Enjoyment in Class Are Closely Related to Improved English Proficiency

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Abstract

This study investigated the factors, such as students' foreign language enjoyment, their foreign language classroom anxiety, the teacher's language choice (English-only instruction versus English instruction with limited legitimate Japanese support), and demographics that affect improvement in English proficiency in EFL communicative classes. Ninety-three college students in Japan participated in this research, for which they completed a questionnaire after the seventh lesson of 14 total lessons during a semester. In addition to t-tests, a stepwise multiple linear regression analysis was performed using the dependent variable of the change in every student's scores between the midterm and the final examination and six independent variables: age, gender, nationality, the teacher's language choice, anxiety levels, and enjoyment levels. The results reveal that higher levels of enjoyment in class are significantly correlated with improvement in students' English proficiency. The present study suggests that enjoyment levels, instead of anxiety levels, affect improvement in students' English proficiency regardless of teachers' language choices. Therefore, it is important for teachers to provide classes that are enjoyable for students by motivating and providing the students with activities in which they will succeed, thereby ensuring their self-confidence.

Keywords: communicative English classes, foreign language classroom anxiety, foreign language enjoyment, language choice, proficiency improvement

1. Introduction

English education in Japan has gradually shifted towards the inclusion of communicative methods. Many Japanese universities currently have an English-only rule in communicative English classes, which may cause students to experience anxiety. Some researchers have focused on decreasing anxiety due to students' performances deteriorating because of high anxiety levels. However, research that investigates both anxiety and enjoyment has recently become popular because students' anxiety can decrease and their performance can improve if they enjoy learning. Therefore, this study will examine the relationship between students' foreign language enjoyment (FLE), which is the enjoyment associated with learning something new about a foreign language (FL) and engaging in activities with peers using the FL, and foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), the teacher's language choice (English-only instruction versus English instruction with limited legitimate Japanese support), and improvements in students' English proficiency. By doing so, the conditions that are preferable for improving students' English proficiency will be identified.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

In tandem with the globalization of society, English education in Japan has gradually shifted from the grammar-translation method to the inclusion of communicative methods (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). A contributing factor to students' anxiety when conducting pair and group work in university communicative English classes is related to the English-only rule (Rivers, 2011), and students could improve their English

proficiency if their anxiety levels were reduced (Krashen, 1982). Therefore, some researchers (Botes et al., 2020; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994) have focused on decreasing FLCA. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) situations where students and teachers share a first language (L1), L1 use is effective in reducing student anxiety and increasing content understanding (Rivers, 2011). L1s are useful for facilitating FL learning when used in single-nationality classes (Cook, 2001) because it is difficult for students to internalize and process messages simply by being exposed to the target language (TL) (Moore, 2010). Explaining new and difficult phrases or words (Lee & Macaro, 2013; Song & Lee, 2019), providing grammar instructions (Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Liu et al., 2012; Song, 2009), cultivating a better understanding (Deller & Rinvulcri, 2002), and providing translations (Atkinson, 1987; Grim, 2010; Klevberg, 2000; Weschler, 1997) are all situations in which students' L1s are generally used. Overall, the use of students' L1s may assist with comprehension and allows students to manage difficult situations, which decreases anxiety levels and enhances the motivation levels, risk-taking and self-confidence that are related to acquiring a second language (L2) or FL (Cook, 2010).

2.2 Foreign Language Enjoyment

Second language acquisition (SLA) studies have examined negative emotions such as anxiety, but some researchers have also incorporated positive emotions such as enjoyment (MacIntyre et al., 2019). MacIntyre and Mercer (2014) began a positive movement in psychology and report that, if TL learners have an enjoyable learning experience, their self-confidence and motivation increases and their anxiety decreases. With enjoyment gradually increasing and anxiety decreasing, these two emotions appear to be dependent on each other in some cases, but it is more likely that they are independent, and students merely experience these emotions at the same time (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dewaele et al., 2018). Moreover, Dewaele et al. (2018) and Dewaele and MacIntyre (2018) report that the variables related to teachers' practices result in enjoyable experiences, while learners' internal factors, such as personality traits, may be more closely related to anxiety. Jin and Dewaele (2018) state that a teacher's support is not as important for reducing anxiety as mutual help from students is, and they also report that students' optimistic attitudes are significantly associated with reduced anxiety. Therefore, the authors conclude that, while teachers can contribute to increasing students' enjoyment, student empowerment has a strong impact on reducing students' anxiety. Furthermore, Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018) state that students at the advanced levels experience more enjoyment and less anxiety. Enjoyment and anxiety are related to students' progress in their levels of English proficiency positively and negatively, respectively. The three-month study conducted by Saito et al. (2018) reveals that frequent and regular practice in a TL in enjoyable classes can promote SLA, reduce anxiety, and improve TL proficiency.

Both enjoyable classes and L1 use are advantageous for decreasing students' anxiety and increasing their English proficiency. The nature of the enjoyment and anxiety has been studied in the literature, but the relationship between improvements in the students' English proficiency, the students' enjoyment and anxiety, and the teacher's language choice has not been investigated in Japanese EFL college students. Therefore, the following topic was determined for the present research: Which factors, such as FLE, FLCA, the teacher's language choice, and demographics, affect students' improvement in their English proficiency in communicative English classrooms at a Japanese university?

3. Method

A prospective and quantitative approach was adopted for this study.

3.1 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted after approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the university at which the research was carried out. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. The participants were informed that their anonymity was guaranteed, that they could ask questions about the survey, and that they could exit the survey at any time.

3.2 Participants

Table 1 shows the racial and demographic distribution of the 93 students from a Japanese university who participated in the study. They were divided into the one English-only instruction (EE) group and the two English instruction with limited legitimate Japanese support (EJ) groups. All participants (64 males and 29 females) were freshmen between 18 and 23 years old (mean 18.59 ± 0.82 S.D.); the age distribution was 18 years ($n = 47$), 19 years ($n = 40$), 20–23 years ($n = 5$), and no answer ($n = 1$). No significant difference was observed in the groups' ages ($t = -1.794$, $df = 90$, $p = 0.076$) or the gender ratio ($t = 0.157$, $df = 91$, $p = 0.876$). The participants were largely racially homogeneous (61 Japanese males and 27 Japanese females: Japanese L1,

English L2), but some were foreigners (two Chinese males and two Chinese females: Chinese L1, Japanese L2, English L3; and one South Korean male: Korean L1, Japanese L2, English L3). The participants were required to study EFL. The Japanese researcher, who is a bilingual Japanese-English instructor, taught three EFL classes on the level determined by the students' scores on the Institutional Program of Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC IP) that was administered as a placement test before the class commenced. The students' English proficiency ranged from 220 to 745 (mean 431.37 ± 100.12 S.D.) on the TOEIC IP. The researcher taught one class consisting of 31 students (21 Japanese males and 10 Japanese females), which was the EE group, and two classes consisting of 62 students in total, which were the EJ groups (27 students in one class: 17 Japanese males, eight Japanese females, two Chinese females; and 35 students in the other class: 23 Japanese males, nine Japanese females, two Chinese males, and one Korean male). The researcher is experienced in teaching in English-language classrooms as she studied Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages abroad (Master's in the United States of America and Doctorate in the United Kingdom) for seven years and has 18 years of teaching experience. Furthermore, she passed the first-grade Standard Test for English Proficiency test and has a national guide certificate in English, with both tests including an oral test. She actively communicated with her students in all three classes and made an effort to create comfortable student-centered classrooms that included pair and group work in which the students were eager to take risks when speaking English.

Table 1. Participants' Demographics

	Total No. (<i>n</i> = 93)	EE group (<i>n</i> = 31) EJ group (<i>n</i> = 62)		
		Class 1 (<i>n</i> = 31)	Class 2 (<i>n</i> = 27)	Class 3 (<i>n</i> = 35)
Gender	Male (<i>n</i> = 64)	21	17	26
	Female (<i>n</i> = 29)	10	10	9
Age	18 years old (<i>n</i> = 47)	19	10	18
	19 years old (<i>n</i> = 40)	12	14	14
	20-23 years old (<i>n</i> = 5)	0	3	2
	No answer (<i>n</i> = 1)	0	0	1
Nationality	Japanese (<i>n</i> = 88)	31	25	32
	Chinese (<i>n</i> = 4)	0	2	2
	Korean (<i>n</i> = 1)	0	0	1

3.3 Setting

The survey was conducted in a mandatory freshman English course in which particular emphasis is placed on the development of communicative competence in listening and speaking. The textbook, lesson plans, homework, and tests were the same for all three classes. The students learned English using a textbook that contained practical exercises on vocabulary, phrases and idioms, pronunciation, grammar, listening comprehension in English conversations, and reading comprehension, and the students expressed their own opinions in English about what they had listened to in pairs or groups of their classmates. Each class lasted 100 minutes, and one lesson was conducted per week for each group. The students were taught and studied units one through six before the midterm examination and units seven through twelve before the final examination. The midterm examination was conducted in the seventh class, and the final examination was conducted in the 14th class. The textbook had two progress tests as review units for units one to six and units seven to twelve, respectively, which were used as the midterm and final examinations. The abilities of listening comprehension, communicative short reading, grammar, and vocabulary were assessed. The purpose of the examinations was to confirm whether the students had acquired the knowledge they had studied in the textbook.

The classes were mainly conducted in English, but two types of classes were examined in this study: one EE class (using only English) and two EJ classes (sometimes using Japanese). In the EE group, the students' questions were answered and detailed explanations were given to the students in simple and slow English (see Table 2). Homework and tests were explained in plain English repeatedly and sometimes written on the blackboard. The teacher spent less than 10% of class time speaking Japanese in the EJ groups in order to assist the students. Japanese was used to facilitate the students' understanding as follows:

- (1) To provide the Japanese meaning of phrases and new words;
- (2) To clarify when listening to idiomatic phrases; and
- (3) To explain sentences containing complex grammar.

In addition, English-Japanese translation was used to provide important information to the students, such as explanations about homework and examinations, in order to minimize the disadvantages experienced by students who lacked listening comprehension. The teacher also asked students help each other and build good relationships with classmates and also sometimes used humor in class; these requests and humor were presented in English.

Table 2. Teacher's Language

	EE group	EJ group
1. New words/phrases	Explain slowly in simpler English	Explain in Japanese
2. Difficult questions	Explain satisfactorily by using different English expressions	Clarify listening comprehension of idiomatic sentences in Japanese Explain the sentences that included complicated grammar in Japanese
3. Important information (HW & tests)	Explain repeatedly in simple English Write on the blackboard in English if necessary	Use of English-Japanese translation
4. Rapport building	Get students to help each other in English Say something humorous in English	Get students to help each other in English Say something humorous in English

3.4 The Questionnaire

The questionnaire by Dewaele et al. (2018) was used to assess the students' levels of enjoyment and anxiety (see the appendix). The Cronbach's alpha for the 10 enjoyment items was 0.88, while the Cronbach's alpha for the eight anxiety items was 0.85. The 10 FLE questionnaire items (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014) were used, and they were categorized into three dimensions of enjoyment: private versus social, teacher controlled versus peer controlled, and a positive atmosphere in the FL classroom. The eight anxiety items were from an anxiety scale (Horwitz et al., 1986) and were classified into three dimensions of FLCA: anxiety, insufficient confidence, and nervousness. A five-point Likert scale was used and ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with higher total scores indicating higher levels for each category. The wording of the two anxiety items was reversed to ensure that items were answered correctly. The two items that had their wording switched were adjusted when recorded in a Microsoft Excel file. The questionnaire also contained five items for eliciting the students' background information, which included identification number, age, gender, nationality, and the participants' languages (L1, L2, L3).

3.5 Data Collection

The questionnaire was distributed during class time after the seventh lesson in the semester. The students were asked to provide their perspectives of the English class from the beginning of the class to that point (a time span of approximately two months). To increase the response rate, the survey was completed in approximately 10 minutes during class. To provide evidence of the language choice, the researcher recorded the lessons in each class.

3.6 Data Analysis

Independent t-tests were used in order to compare between the EJ and EE groups the students' levels of anxiety and enjoyment, their TOEIC IP scores, and their midterm and final examination scores. Paired t-tests were used to compare each student's midterm and final examination results. Using the Bonferroni correction, multiple comparisons of the t-tests' results were performed. A stepwise multiple linear regression analysis was conducted based on the six independent variables of age, gender, nationality, the teacher's language choice (English instruction with limited legitimate Japanese help versus English-only instruction), the levels of enjoyment, and anxiety. Of these six independent variables, three of the demographic factors (age, gender, and nationality) were included as independent variables because these may have been related to the other three independent variables of the teacher's language choice, enjoyment, and anxiety in order to determine whether there are confounding

factors among the six independent variables. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 23 was used for the statistical analyses (significant at $p < 0.05$).

4. Results

4.1 The Validity

The ten items of enjoyment had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88 and the eight items of anxiety had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83.

4.2 The T-Tests' Results

The students' test scores (TOEIC, midterm, and final) and scores for anxiety and enjoyment in each group were compared. As seen in Table 3, of the 93 participants, two students did not sit the TOEIC placement test. The average test score on the final exam was higher than that on the midterm exam in both groups. With regard to the differences between the two groups, no statistically significant difference was observed. However, there was a statistically significant difference in the scores for the midterm test (mean = 14.40, $n = 93$, S.D. = 2.546) and the final test (mean = 14.98, $n = 93$, S.D. = 2.454) ($t = -2.476$, $df = 92$, $p = 0.015$) for the groups combined as a whole.

Table 3. Levels of English Proficiency, Enjoyment, and Anxiety

	EE group (n=31)		EJ group (n = 62)		Statistical value (EE vs EJ)
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
TOEIC placement	438.55	105.27	427.67	98.06	$t = 0.489$, $df = 89$, $p = 0.626$,
Midterm exam	14.74	2.65	14.23	2.50	$t = 0.899$, $df = 91$ $p = 0.371$
Final exam	14.93	3.09	15.00	2.09	$t = -0.140$, $df = 91$ $p = 0.889$
Enjoyment	37.26	6.37	36.63	6.59	$t = 0.438$, $df = 91$ $p = 0.662$
Anxiety	25.58	6.72	27.00	5.76	$t = -1.059$, $df = 91$ $p = 0.292$

Note. TOEIC placement ($n = 91$), EE group ($n = 31$) and EJ group ($n = 60$); TOEIC score, from 5 to 495 for the Listening Section; 5 to 495 for the Reading Section; 10 to 990 for the total score; The range of enjoyment, from 10 (minimum) to 50 (maximum); The range of anxiety, from 8 (minimum) to 40 (maximum).

4.3 The Results of the Stepwise Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

The results for the stepwise multiple linear regression analysis are shown in Table 4. A significant regression equation was found ($F(1, 91) = 5.499$, $p = 0.021$) in which $R^2 = 0.058$ in FLE. The model predicted that the change in each student's score between the midterm and final examination would be equal to $-2.493 + 0.084 \times$ the score for FLE, where the FLE was measured using a five-point Likert scale. Therefore, the model predicted an overall function score for students studying in EFL communicative classes at a Japanese university, with the score increasing between the midterm and final examination. The coefficients were interpreted as follows: The mean function score increased by approximately 0.084 times in accordance with an additional level of FLE. The final model had a coefficient of multiple determinations and an R^2 of 0.058, indicating that the variable in the model explained roughly 6% of the variation in the response variables. However, the other variables, such as age, gender, nationality, the teacher's language choice, and anxiety were excluded from the stepwise analysis. Therefore, only enjoyment was significantly associated with the students' improvement in their English proficiency.

Table 4. The Result of the Multiple Linear Regression Analysis (Stepwise)

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for B		
	B	S. E.	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
1	(Constant)	-2.493	1.342		-1.858	0.067	-5.16	0.173
	FLE	0.084	0.036	0.24	2.345	0.021	0.013	0.155

Note. a. Dependent Variable, the score gap between midterm and final tests; B, partial regression coefficient; S.E., standard error; Beta, probability distributions; t, t-statistic; Sig., significant level.

5. Discussion

The t-test results demonstrate that no significant differences were observed for age, gender, TOEIC IP score, midterm examination, final examination, enjoyment, or anxiety between both groups. The result of the stepwise multiple linear regression analysis showed that enjoyment, not anxiety, was significantly associated with improvement in the students' English proficiency regardless of the teacher's language choice. Decreasing students' anxiety is an effective way of improving their English language skills in lessons that are mainly conducted in English (Cook, 2010), but recent research has focused on students' feelings of enjoyment rather than anxiety (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014). MacIntyre et al. (2019) reported that students' confidence and motivation increased and their anxiety decreased when they enjoy learning a TL. In this study, the negative effect of anxiety was weaker than the positive effect of enjoyment on FL performance. Therefore, as Dewaele et al. (2018) and Jin and Dewaele (2018) report, it is preferable for teachers to prioritize their students' enjoyment instead of their anxiety.

Moreover, Dewaele et al. (2018) conclude that anxiety is derived from the student's internal feelings, such as low fluency in the FL or the dislike of FL classes. Therefore, teachers' efforts to reduce students' anxiety (by using some Japanese in this study) may not be effective. Similarly, Jin and Dewaele (2018) report that teachers' emotional support is less effective than classmates' support and peer solidarity for decreasing anxiety. They further state that students' positive attitudes toward learning English, comprising elements such as a good self-image and comfortable relationships with their peers, is a reasonable consideration when decreasing their levels of anxiety. In this study, there was extensive pair and group work in every lesson, thereby facilitating the students' relationships with each other being more directly related to their feelings of enjoyment and anxiety rather than their relationships with their teacher. As the students had good relationships with their classmates, they did not feel overly anxious and enjoyed the class. It is also possible that there was no difference in the students' levels of anxiety or enjoyment between the groups that was caused by the teacher's language choice as the teacher may not have had a strong influence on the students' feelings.

Furthermore, Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018) find that students at advanced levels had lower levels of anxiety and higher levels of enjoyment. Enjoyment might be correlated positively with students' improved English proficiency. Following their three months of research, Saito et al. (2018) conclude that students might be able to decrease their anxiety and improve their SLA if they enjoy practicing a TL frequently and regularly. In brief, it is predicted that students who have enjoyable experiences in their classroom lessons will improve their English proficiency regardless of the teacher's language choice.

6. Limitations

Firstly, the sample used in this study was small. Therefore, the results may change according to the sample size. Secondly, the study did not use a speaking test as a proficiency assessment. Thirdly, this study was cross-sectional, while a longitudinal study may be more appropriate for observing changes in students' feelings, such as enjoyment and anxiety. Fourthly, the majority of participants were Japanese university students, and their English proficiency varied from beginner to intermediate level. Fifthly, there was no significance identified in the teacher's language choice between the groups because the amount of Japanese used was only approximately 10% in each lesson for the EJ classes. Sixthly, other important factors such as elicitation, length of waiting time, clarification, and student-teacher interaction were not investigated in this study. Seventhly, the researcher gathered data from both EJ classes she led (each class consisted of fewer than 35 students), but the two EJ classes were not necessarily the same as each other in the present study. To minimize the possible differences between the two EJ classes, the textbook and the teacher's teaching methods were identical. The students' English proficiency in the two classes was comparable at the beginning of the study, but each classroom possibly

being idiosyncratic and context-dependent in nature cannot be completely excluded. Thus, these findings may not be generalizable, and these limitations may be the reason for why the results of this study differ from those of other studies in the existing literature. Therefore, further research could: conduct replication studies in EFL classrooms in other countries and Japan, conduct speaking tests, incorporate longitudinal research designs, increase the number of participants or the amount of L1 use in the EJ group, examine other important factors such as elicitation, the length of waiting time, clarification, and student-teacher interaction, and assign one class each to the EE group and EJ groups.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated the factors, such as students' FLE, their FLCA, and the teacher's language choice (English-only instruction versus English instruction with limited legitimate Japanese support), that affect students' improvement in their English proficiency in EFL communicative classes in Japan. There was no difference between the two groups with regard to the IP TOEIC score, the students' results in the midterm and final examinations, or the students' enjoyment and anxiety levels. However, in both groups, high levels of enjoyment were significantly correlated to improvement in the students' English proficiency. Considering that there was no significant difference between anxiety levels in the two groups and that the students' improved English proficiency was not related to anxiety, high levels of enjoyment are a key factor for improving students' English proficiency regardless of the teacher's language choice.

The classes in which the experiment was conducted in this study were characterized by a lot of pair and group work, thereby allowing the students to enjoy the work with other students in the classroom, which may have contributed to their higher levels of enjoyment and their increased English proficiency. Therefore, it is best for teachers to make every effort to increase their students' enjoyment levels instead of reducing their anxiety levels.

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