Learner coping strategies for foreign language anxiety

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The primary purpose of this study is to investigate learners' coping strategies for anxiety experienced in foreign language (FL) learning contexts. One hundred and eight Japanese EFL college students enrolled in a content-based English language program participated in this study. They were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire in their first language (L1), Japanese. Because it can be assumed that coping strategies for FL anxiety are closely related to the contexts where such anxiety is experienced, their perceived anxiety-provoking contexts within the English classroom were also investigated. Anxiety-provoking contexts and coping strategies were identified through the KJ method. Results revealed that the students used relatively more positive strategies and fewer negative strategies in each of 11 anxiety-provoking contexts. Based on these findings, pedagogical implications related to FL anxiety management are also discussed.

本研究の目的は、学習者が用いる外国語不安対処方略を調査することである。調査対象は、英語を外国語として学び、英語の内容中心授業を履修している日本人大学生108名である。調査には自由記述の質問紙が用いられ、調査対象は自分の第一言語（日本語）で質問に回答した。各対処方略は、不安喚起場面と密接に関係していると考えられるため、英語の授業で、どのような時に不安を感じているのかについても、調査対象に回答を求めた。不安喚起場面と対処方略について、KJ法を用いて分析を行った。その結果、11の不安喚起場面それぞれについて、相対的に、より多くの積極的な方略が導き出された。一方で、消極的な方略も数は少ないが認められた。これらの調査結果に基づき、外国語不安のコントロールに向けた教育的示唆を提言している。

Background

It is said that foreign and second language (FL/L2) learning involves various interrelated factors and FL anxiety is one of the affective variables which play an important role in learning a new language (e.g., Brown, 2000; Ellis, 2004). The terms *foreign language* (*FL*) and *second language* (*L2*) are generally distinguished in terms of the contexts where a target language is learned (e.g., Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). Although in some cases there is merit in distinguishing research findings between FL and L2 contexts, in this paper, I simply use the term FL because the participants were learning English in a FL context.

According to comprehensive reviews of the literature on FL anxiety (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005; Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre, 1999; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Motoda, 2005; Oxford, 1999), two issues have been consistently indicated. First, research has confirmed that FL anxiety is a unique form of anxiety specific to FL learning contexts. In other words, anxiety associated

with FL learning is distinguishable from anxieties experienced in other situations. The second issue concerns FL anxiety in relation to FL learning. Although some researchers have highlighted the potential facilitating nature of anxiety in FL learning (Scovel, 2001; Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001) and others have even claimed that anxiety is a consequence of poor language learning (Sparks, Ganschow, & Javorsky, 2000), numerous empirical studies have revealed the negative relationships between anxiety and learning in FL contexts.

Because of its debilitating nature in relation to FL learning, FL anxiety is widely considered as a factor to be reduced and various pedagogical suggestions for anxiety reduction have been proposed by various authors. These suggestions have generally highlighted what teachers can do to help students reduce or manage FL anxiety. For example, in terms of classroom management, teachers are expected to create a supportive and cooperative classroom atmosphere, to develop learner community, or to introduce group-work activities in an attempt to create a low-anxiety classroom (e.g., studies reported in Horwitz & Young, 1991; Young, 1999; for a comprehensive review, see Oxford, 1999; Young, 1991).

On the other hand, few studies have attempted to investigate what students are *actually doing* when they experience FL anxiety (e.g., Kondo & Yang, 2004, 2006). In order to further develop more practical teachers' strategies to help students who are struggling with FL anxiety, I think there is a need to focus on not only pedagogical ideas from the researchers and instructors, but also the voices of students who react in different ways to FL anxiety. Therefore, this study addressed the issue of learners' coping strategies for FL anxiety. Two research questions were investigated as follows:

1. What kind of contexts do learners perceive as anxiety-provoking?
2. What kind of strategies do learners use to cope with FL anxiety?

Method
Participants

This study involved students enrolled in an English language program (hereafter, EC, which is a vernacular term used by the students) at a university in Japan. As of 2005, the time when this survey was conducted, the program was a required, four-semester (EC1-EC4), content-based integrated skills program that enrolled about 1000 students. Each semester consisted of four classes a week (e.g., writing, seminar, listening, and presentation), and all the students in the program followed the same syllabus and used the same materials despite the classes being formed according to the students' English level (i.e., TOEFL scores) (Balint, 2005; Quinn & Nachi, 2004). The survey was administered to 108 students. With the exception of three non-responding students, data collected from 105 students were included in the analysis.

Material

A Japanese version of an open-ended questionnaire was used (see Appendix), which posed two questions: "When do you experience anxiety in EC classes?" and "How do you cope with such anxiety?"

Procedure

EC4 students from six classes completed the questionnaire at the beginning of a regular class in December 2005. After a brief English announcement by the instructors, the researchers explained the point of the survey in Japanese and distributed the questionnaires. The students were asked to respond to the questions in Japanese.

Analysis

Because the collected answers were potentially chaotic as a whole, I adopted the *KJ method* to categorize the answers, identifying some similarities in the students' voices. The KJ method was developed by Kawakita Jiro (1967, 1970), an anthropologist. It is an inductive approach used to systematically analyze qualitative data as typified by field notes. The basic process of the KJ method consists of four phases: card making, grouping and naming, chart making, and explanation.

In this study, all responses including "nothing special" were transcribed on postcards (card making). Most students responded with more than one idea for each question and those ideas were transcribed separately (i.e., one idea per card). Meanwhile, because I assumed that the reported strategies for dealing with FL anxiety were closely related to the contexts where such anxiety was experienced, each student's responses about anxiety-provoking contexts and coping strategies were both described on the same card (see Figure 1). At this stage, 181 cards were created.

In the second phase, the cards were shuffled, spread out on the floor and grouped according to the similarities among the descriptions on the cards (grouping). Each group was given a title that represented the students' responses in a group (naming). In an attempt to ensure objectivity, grouping and naming were based on discussions between the researcher who had previously been enrolled as a student in EC classes, and a colleague who was only vaguely familiar with the EC program. Based on my assumption that coping strategies were closely related to the contexts where each learner experiences FL anxiety, we firstly attempted to identify the groups of anxiety-provoking contexts, and the reported coping strategies were withheld at this stage. In order to create superordinate groups of anxiety-provoking contexts, the process of grouping and naming was repeated three times in total, and the original 181 cards were categorized into 86, 38, and finally 12 groups.

One student's response

1. Anxiety-provoking contexts: Presentations, discussions
2. Strategies: To prepare them well in advance; to think, "It's no use worrying about them."

Card making

The four cards below were created from the above student's responses.

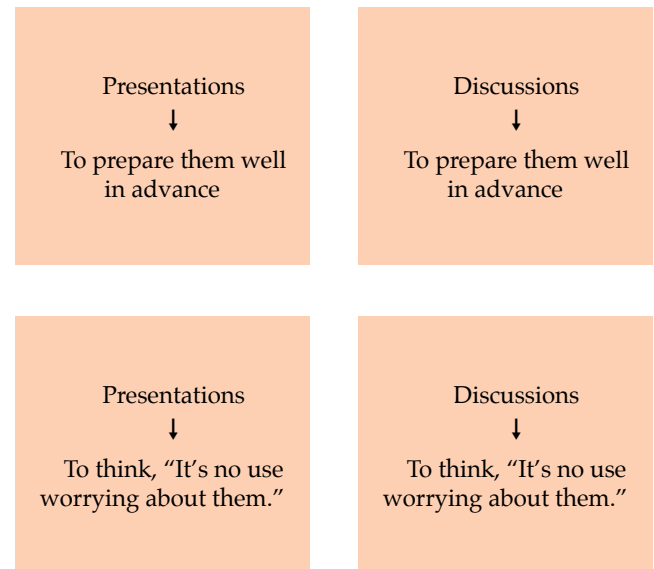| Presentations ↓ To prepare them well in advance | Discussions ↓ To prepare them well in advance |
| Presentations ↓ To think, "It's no use worrying about them." | Discussions ↓ To think, "It's no use worrying about them." |

Figure 1. Example of card making

In the third phase, I attempted to clarify the relations among the 12 superordinate groups by arranging them on a large sheet of paper, creating a chart (chart making). Finally, the KJ method of categorizing the anxiety-provoking contexts was completed with the explanation provided in the following section (explanation). With regards to coping strategies, the KJ method was also applied in order to categorize the students' responses according to each of the 11 anxiety-provoking contexts except one group named "no special anxiety."

Results
Anxiety-provoking contexts

This section addresses the first research question. Through the KJ method, 12 anxiety provoking contexts in ECs were identified as follows ([n] = the number of students whose responses were included in each group):

1. Anxiety about participating in class or anxiety experienced in the classroom, which was provoked by a lack of preparations for class [22]
2. When students speak English in front of the class (e.g., presentation or group discussion) [19]
3. When students struggle to understand what classmates and especially teachers talk about, and have difficulty in keeping up with class [19]
4. When students have difficulty in making their points in English or in getting through to their interlocutors [15]
5. When students have trouble expressing their ideas although they are required to do so [15]
6. When students interact with classmates who can speak English fluently (e.g., returnee students or students with experience studying abroad) [11]
7. Anxiety the student felt about his/her own English proficiency [11]
8. Anxiety about whether or not they can pass the course [7]
9. When students interact with not-so-close classmates or teachers with whom they feel a psychological distance [5]
10. Anxiety arising just before a presentation, due to fear of making a mistake [4]
11. Anxiety about whether or not they can finish assignments or complete assignments satisfactorily [3]
12. No special anxiety [6]

The possible relationships among these contexts are described in Figure 2. The above numbers 1-12 correspond to the numbers in the figure. With the exception of (12) *No special anxiety*, 11 groups appeared categorizable as anxiety-provoking contexts in ECs. According to my experience in ECs as a learner, classes basically consisted of group discussions and presentations, which were based on a large number of preparation assignments. Since 2005, students have been required to attend EC classes and must not miss more than three classes in order to earn credits for the course. On the basis of this rule regarding attendance, anxiety for (1) *Participating in class without enough preparation*, (8) *Passing the course*, and (11) *Class assignments* would be attributed to the features of ECs, and then they can be categorized into one group: *Anxiety Related to ECs.*

Next, anxiety was experienced when students were (2) *Speaking English in front of the class* and they had (3) *Difficulty in following teachers' (and classmates') talk* and (4) *Difficulty in making one's point in English*. Because these situations seemed to be associated with English use and English processing, I labeled them as *Anxiety Related to English Communication*.

Meanwhile, the following three types of anxiety, (5) *Trouble in expressing ideas*, (9) *Interactions with not-so-close classmates*, and (10) *Fear of making a mistake in presentations*, would perhaps be observed not only in English learning contexts but also in first language (L1) situations. In this case, students might be more

concerned about general interpersonal evaluations rather than *Anxiety Related to English Communication*, which can be considered as learners' concerns specifically related to language use or language processing. However, it is plausible to think that these types of general anxiety are strengthened in English learning contexts where college students cannot appear as intelligent, sensitive, or witty as they can in L1 situations (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Horwitz, 2001; Yashima, 2004). Therefore, I labeled this group as *General Anxiety Exacerbated in English Contexts*.

With regard to the issue of (6) *Interactions with classmates who speak fluent English*, it is likely to share both features of *Anxiety Related to ECs* and *Anxiety Related to English Communication*. Upon entering college, most Japanese students have had just six years of previous English study at junior and senior high school.

Therefore, interactions with classmates who can speak English fluently as typified by returnee students might be one significant aspect of ECs. In addition, during the class, students are encouraged to use English; therefore concerns about interactions with returnee students would also be associated with *Anxiety Related to English Communication*.

Finally, (7) *Anxiety related to one's own English proficiency* is named *Self-perception* because it relates to students' self-perception of their own English proficiency. I arranged it separately from the other three anxiety-provoking groups, because self-perception could be viewed as internal communications within the students' minds, while the other anxiety-provoking groups involve direct interactions with classmates, teachers, or materials in the external learning environment.
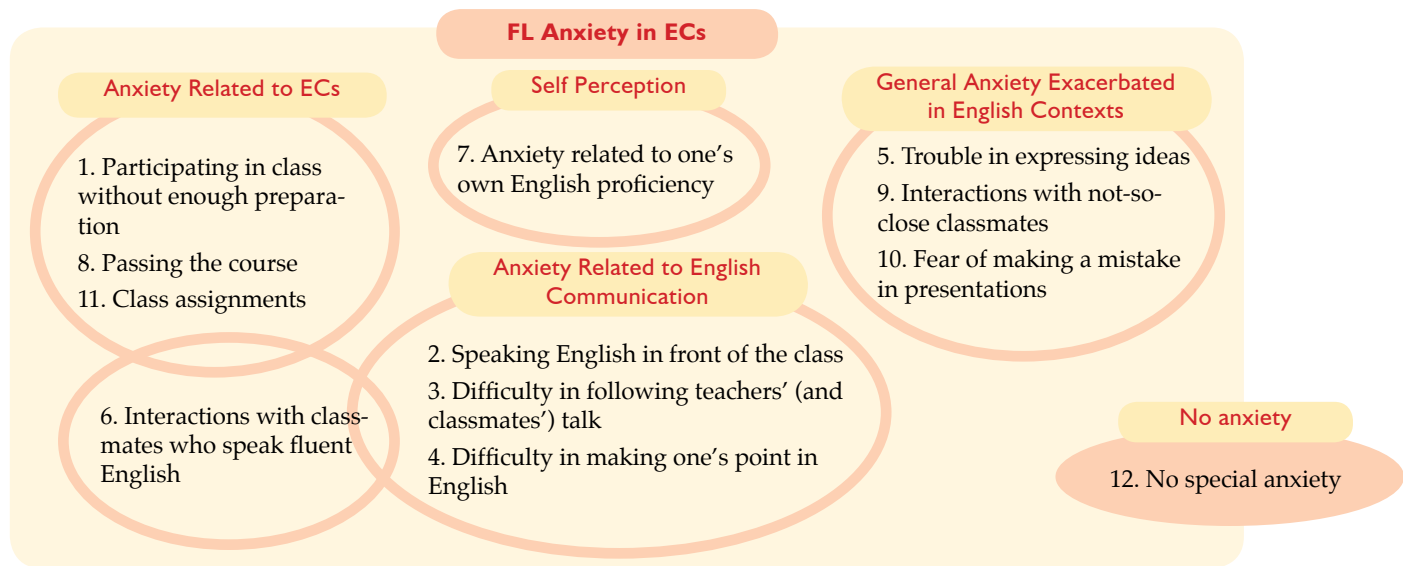
FL Anxiety in ECs

Anxiety Related to ECs

1. Participating in class without enough preparation
8. Passing the course
11. Class assignments

6. Interactions with classmates who speak fluent English

Self Perception

7. Anxiety related to one's own English proficiency

Anxiety Related to English Communication

2. Speaking English in front of the class
3. Difficulty in following teachers' (and classmates') talk
4. Difficulty in making one's point in English

General Anxiety Exacerbated in English Contexts

5. Trouble in expressing ideas
9. Interactions with not-so-close classmates
10. Fear of making a mistake in presentations

No anxiety

12. No special anxiety

Figure 2. Possible relations among 12 anxiety-provoking contexts in EC classrooms

Coping strategies for FL anxiety

This section shows the results from the second research question. In Table 1, reported coping strategies were listed according to each of the 11 anxiety-provoking contexts except the answer of "No special anxiety."

Table 1. Coping strategies for FL anxiety in 11 anxiety-provoking contexts

1. Participating in class without enough preparation
• Participate in class with a positive attitude(6)
• Address difficulties actively(6)
• Distance oneself from troubles(6)
• No special strategy / No response(2)

2. Speaking English in front of the class
• Prepare for speaking English in advance(8)
• Say "Take it easy!" silently to one's self(3)
• Make greater efforts to endure one's anxiety(3)
• Use Japanese(1)
• Unable to deal with anxiety / No special strategy / No response(4)

3. Difficulty in following teachers' (and classmates') talk
• Ask for help from classmates (and teachers)(15)
• Try to get through the difficulty!(1)
• Ignore it(1)
• Answers that could not be interpreted(3)

4. Difficulty in making one's point in English
• Try to use English within one's limited language proficiency(10)
• Ask classmates (and teachers) to help(3)
• Use Japanese(4)
• No response(1)

5. Trouble in expressing ideas
• Try to deal with the trouble constructively(10)
• Prepare for speaking English in advance(5)
• Give up confronting the trouble(1)

6. Interactions with classmates who speak fluent English
• Try to interact with a positive attitude(5)
• Attempt to learn English from higher-proficiency students(3)
• Participate in the interactions passively(4)

7. Anxiety related to one's own English proficiency
• Try to deal with the trouble constructively by oneself(8)
• Ask classmates (and teachers) for help(5)
• Distance oneself from the troubles(1)

8. Passing the course
• Make efforts to participate in class(3)
• Stay up all night completing assignments(1)
• Ask teachers for help(1)
• No response(1)

9. Interactions with not-so-close classmates
• Try to interact with a positive attitude(3)
• No special strategy / No response(2)

10. Fear of making a mistake in presentations
• Do an imagery rehearsal before the presentation(1)
• Try to go through a presentation!(1)
• Say "Things will work out!" silently to one's self(1)
• Try not to worry about making mistakes in presentations(1)

11. Class assignments
• Review completed assignment several times(1)
• Complete assignment to the point of what one can do(1)
• No response(1)

Note: [n] = the number of students whose answers were included in each group

Discussion and conclusion

As for the contexts that the students perceived as anxiety-provoking, the present findings show similarities with previous research on FL anxiety. First, previous studies have revealed the close relationship between self-perceived FL proficiency and FL anxiety (e.g., MacIntyre, Noels, & Clement, 1997; Price, 1991). More specifically, Young (1991) pointed out that learners with a low self-perceived FL proficiency are "the likeliest candidates" (p. 427) for FL anxiety. Some participants in this study might be also struggling with anxiety stemming from their own low levels of self-perceived proficiency.

Second, *Anxiety Related to English Communication* shares similarities with the components of the *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (*FLCAS*) developed by Horwitz, et al. (1986). The FLCAS consists of three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension is defined as anxiety associated with either real or anticipated interpersonal communication (McCroskey, 1977). Test anxiety is a type of anxiety engendered by a fear of failure related to academic performance (e.g., taking FL oral tests) (Sarason, 1978). Fear of negative evaluation refers to an apprehension about others' evaluation and the expectation that other people would evaluate oneself negatively (Watson & Friend, 1969). Though test anxiety is not always associated with interpersonal evaluation (Leary, 1986), the FLCAS generally measures learners' anxiety in interactional and interpersonal situations in the FL classroom. In this study, *Anxiety Related to English Communication* certainly corresponds to these situations. As some researchers have indicated (e.g., Horwitz, et al., 1986; Price, 1991), the students in this study also perceived speaking and listening in a FL as anxiety-provoking activities.

From a pedagogical perspective, one particular note here is the interpretation of (3) *Difficulty in following teachers' (and classmates') talk* in *Anxiety Related to English Communication*. This type of difficulty may be attributable to at least two factors: the students' limited proficiency in English, or the teacher's unclear explanations. Although both factors would play a detrimental role in comprehending English input, from a pedagogical viewpoint, I think the issue of whether teachers provide clear explanations is more significant when considering how they can help learners to manage anxiety.

With regard to coping strategies for FL anxiety, the results revealed that the students were most likely to use positive strategies when anxiety arose in the English classroom. For example, they attempted to address anxiety with positive attitudes, by being well-prepared, or by making a greater effort. Furthermore, the students frequently reported using the strategy of asking classmates for help, especially when they failed to understand the teacher's explanations. Although this study did not evaluate the efficacy of these requests for assistance, for some students, these cooperative interactions with classmates might play an important role in dealing with FL anxiety in certain classroom situations.

Meanwhile, a few negative strategies were also reported. Giving up, ignoring, or distancing oneself from difficult situations seem to be typical examples of passive strategies. Spielman and Randofsky (2001) also reported similar findings in terms of the existence of a non-active strategy. They identified coping strategies for dysphoric tension, but for students in their study the most used strategy was "to distance themselves from the problem and try to ignore it" (p. 272).

Among the various learner coping strategies, one strategy can be considered both positive and negative: the strategy of L1 use. Some students reported using Japanese in order to address anxiety which arose in the English classroom. Most of them used Japanese in the context of (2) *Speaking English in front of the class* and (4) *Difficulty in making one's point in English*. Besides, with regard to the strategy of asking for help from classmates, it

is plausible to think that some Japanese was used during these short cooperative interactions, especially when students were confirming the teachers' explanation with their classmates. In this sense, the strategy of L1 use can be effective and allowed by the teacher. However, if the students speak Japanese too much during discussions or presentations where students were encouraged to use English, this type of L1 use would surely deprive the students of opportunities to improve their L2 proficiency. In this case, teachers need to warn the students about their overuse of the L1.

On the basis of the above discussion, there are at least two limitations in this study. First, coping strategies for FL anxiety were not evaluated on an objective criterion in this study. In other words, the strategies were categorized into positive and negative on the basis of the researchers' experience as a learner. There would be potential, for example, that some students intended to report "distancing oneself from the difficult situations" as a positive strategy. In addition, for a small number of student responses, it was not clear which coping strategies corresponded to the different anxiety-provoking contexts reported. A revised questionnaire could be designed to ensure that participants indicate clearly the strategies employed in each specific context. Second, it remains an issue whether these strategies are effective for reducing FL anxiety and promoting FL learning. Some strategies might work but others might not. Further research regarding strategy effectiveness will be necessary. Although there are limitations, the qualitative findings in this study count for a great deal in terms of the fact that they explored what students were *actually doing* when they experienced FL anxiety. Further research will be required to develop certain criterion to assess coping strategies for FL anxiety and to investigate strategy effectiveness. Future work in this area will ultimately lead to more effective FL learning through better management of learners' FL anxiety.

Informed consent

The author hereby declares that the research subjects gave their informed consent.

Previous version

This study was part of the author's master's thesis (Iizuka, 2007).

Bio data

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Appendix

Questionnaire

(Original version in Japanese)

• あなたはECの授業で、どのような時に不安を感じ、またどのようにその不安を対処しているでしょうか。

• 自由に記述して下さい。できる限り具体的に考えてみて下さい。

―不安を感じる場面や状況―	―その不安への対処方法―

(English translation)

• When do you experience anxiety in **EC classes** and how do you cope with such anxiety?

• Please describe your answers concretely, in as much detail as possible.

Anxiety-provoking contexts	Coping strategies for such anxiety