Tracking and Quantifying Japanese English Language Learner Speaking Anxiety

Jonathan M. Shachter

Kyushu Sangyo University

This study tracked and quantitatively measured Japanese English Language Learner (ELL) classroom speaking anxiety over 12 weeks. Participants (*N* = 75) were first-year Japanese Oral Communication students attending a public university in Japan. The Nervousness Metric (NM) was created by the researcher and was used as a quantitative tracking tool. Beginning from the second week of one school term, students filled out the NM two times in each lesson: once at the start of each week's lesson, and again prior to the lecturer's assigned performance task. Quantitative data produced from the NM tracking system suggested that participants' anxiety decreased, with the most significant decrease occurring between the first and second weeks of data collection. Additional quantitative data indicated that within each lesson, anxiety levels were raised pre-performance. Qualitative data supported previous research by Woodrow (2006), which suggested that ELLs prefer collaborative group activities over individual oral presentations.

　本論は、12週間にわたり日本人英語学習者（ELL）の授業中のスピーキングに対する不安感を調査し、量的に測定することを目的とした。参加者（人数 = 75名）は、日本の公立大学で英語オーラルコミュニケーションの授業に参加している日本人の大学1年生である。量的な調査を行うツールとして緊張度メトリック（NM）が使用された。調査は学期の第2週目に開始され、学生は授業開始時とタスクの前にNMを記入した。NMによる量的データでは、第1週目と第2週目の間に日本人ELLの不安感が最も顕著に減少することが示唆された。また、授業中では、タスク直前に学生の不安度が上がることが示唆された。学生のコメントによる質的データでは、Woodrow（2006）の研究と同様の結果を示し、ELLは各個人で行う口頭発表よりも共同で行うグループ活動を好むことが確認されている。

Speech. Surgery. Air travel. Are you nervous? Unfortunately for Japanese English Language Learners (ELLs), speaking in English can be a terrifying endeavor. Learner anxiety is an impactful force in the classroom, as it has been shown to severely reduce cognitive ability (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). Cognitive impediments can lead to lower scores on assessments and reduced effectiveness in accomplishing even basic classroom speaking tasks. Therefore, Japanese ELL anxiety is an important factor that might go unrecognized by native-speaking (NS) English teachers. By tracking and quantifying Japanese ELL anxiety in regard to English speaking tasks, this study investigated participants' patterns of anxiety throughout the term.

Literature Review

According to Maftoon and Ziafar (2013), anxiety is a significant affective factor in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom because it "inhibits Japanese learners from initiating conversations, raising new topics, and challenging their teachers" (p. 74). The five influential causes of Japanese ELL anxiety proposed by Maftoon and Ziafar are (a) inexperience and cultural inhibitions in dealing with Western teaching methods, (b) interactional domains, (c) the teacher's demeanor and attitude, (d) shyness, and (e) the evaluation paradigm associated with an activity.

The first cause has proven challenging to Japanese learners and foreign EFL teachers alike because of a wide pedagogical disconnect (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). Foreign teachers might assume that all Japanese ELLs are familiar with standard EFL teaching methodologies, such as the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. This, unfortunately, is not the case. Not only are many Japanese ELLs unfamiliar with the tenents of CLT methodology, but in some cases, their pre-university English classes might have been taught completely in Japanese (Glasgow, 2014). When Japanese ELLs enter their universities, they might have had exposure to English, but that does not mean they have the confidence or the experience to successfully adapt to classes led by native teachers, or with activities conducted through CLT methods.

Regarding interactional domains (the second cause), "Japanese language learners assume a ritualistic nature to classrooms, which is characterized by 'conventional rules,' 'formalities,' and 'highly guided behavior'" (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013, p. 75). With CLT, on the other hand, "learners are placed in the communicative settings and acquire language knowledge and communicative competence through active participation and interaction; while

teachers change from a knowledge-giver to an organizer, facilitator and researcher" (Ju, 2013, p. 1581). The CLT approach might differ greatly from the methods that some Japanese ELLs experience prior to entering university.

A teacher's demeanor and attitude also are extremely important to the overall atmosphere of any EFL classroom, but they are especially important in Japan. The attitudes of Japanese students have been shown to be severely altered when they are faced with "a teacher's aversive reactions" (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013, p. 75). While a lack of emotionality or reservation is an attractive trait in Japanese society (Matsumoto, 1991), shyness (the fourth cause of anxiety listed by Maftoon and Ziafar) does not produce positive outcomes in oral production classes.

Maftoon and Ziafar include the evaluation paradigm as the fifth cause of anxiety. They write that Japanese students are inundated with high-stakes testing throughout their junior and senior high school years. In the realm of English testing, students are expected to be competent in "grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension" (p. 75), and are not tested on their communicative ability as often. This disconnect between what is tested and what is expected in the foreign EFL classroom environment can significantly lower students' motivation to participate in communicative activities.

Purpose of the Study

Previous research has focused heavily on the influencing factors of, and possible remedies for, Japanese ELL anxiety. However, there is a lack of longitudinal quantitative data regarding the patterns of anxiety in the classroom. The data produced in this study, by tracking and quantifying ELL nervousness, give teachers a means to investigate patterns of anxiety within a curriculum cycle. For this study, it was predicted that student anxiety would decrease at the beginning of each class over the 12 lessons.

Methodology
Research Site and Participants

The data collection for this analysis took place at a public Japanese university in the first term of 2017. The participants were 75 first-year students (35 males and 40 females) in EFL Oral Communication classes who were 18 and 19 years old. Although the classes had different instructors, they shared the same syllabus, teaching materials, assessment structure, and course outline. The Oral Communication guidelines included the following learning goals: (a) the acquisition of interactive communication

strategies, (b) the strengthening of foundational grammar and vocabulary, and (c) the development of critical thinking skills to further the students' abilities to think and express themselves in English.

Data Collection

Commencing in the second week of Oral Communication I, participants filled out a Nervousness Metric (NM) at the start of each week's lecture and just prior to each lesson's communicative task. The NM was designed by the researcher for the purposes of this data collection (see Appendix). This instrument was informally piloted prior to the term with adult students. Even though formal validity and reliability tests on the instrument were not conducted, the instrument is similar in function to self-assessments of pain intensity used by doctors and nurses. The NM is a simple instrument designed to quickly elicit student self-reports of anxiety levels on a scale from 1 (totally relaxed) to 10 (extremely nervous). In addition to a quantitative self-report, the NM provides students and researchers with a qualitative data source, because both start-of-class and pre-performance reports include a comment section. The NM was created with the following criteria: that it should (a) collect clear data, (b) be easy for Japanese ELLs to use and understand, and (c) be non-intrusive for instructors to implement within an existing lesson plan. Data were collected from weeks 2 through 7 and from weeks 9 through 14. Weeks 1 (introductory lesson), 7 (midterm examination), and 15 (final examination) were not included in this data collection.

At the start of each lesson, instructors gave a brief preview of the day's lecture and wrote a description of the performance task on the whiteboard. Performance tasks included individual speeches, group presentations, and class-observed dialogues. Immediately after announcing the designated performance task (within the first five minutes of class), the NM was distributed. Students were instructed to complete the quantitative metric (in regard to English speaking anxiety specifically), but were told that completing the comment section was optional. Students were requested to leave their comments in English because the researcher hoped to elicit a simple response. After completion, the NM was put aside to not distract from the lecturer's presentation and practice stages. After the presentation and practice stages were finished, the instructors again announced the day's performance task and prompted students to fill out the pre-performance section of the NM. Again, students were instructed that the quantitative metric should be filled-out, and that completing the comment section was

optional. Once completed, the NM was collected by instructors, and students then performed that day's performance task.

Data Analysis

The questionnaires were collected at the end of each week's lesson. Quantitative data were input, and then two average scores (start of class and pre-performance) were produced. The average metrics of all participants were then combined to produce the study's start-of-class and pre-performance average score(s). At the end of the term, qualitative data were compiled and grouped into the following categories: start of class, pre-performance, comment type (positive, negative, or neutral), and frequency.

Findings
Quantitative Results

Table 1. *Weekly NM Averages*

Week	Start of Class	Pre-Performance
2	4.7	7.4
3	4.1	6.2
4	3.8	5.9
5	3.8	5.4
6	3.5	5.3
8	3.5	5.3
9	3.4	4.8
10	3.3	5.3
11	3.1	5.0
12	3.0	4.2
13	2.9	4.9
14	2.9	4.7

Table 1 displays a summary of nervousness rating scores. The highest start-of-class average nervousness score on the NM (4.7) was produced in the week 2 lesson, and the lowest (2.9) was produced in weeks 13 and 14. In the data from the week 2 lesson through the week 14 lesson, NM reports indicated a total reduction of 1.8 points. The largest change (-0.6) from week to week occurred between the week 2 lesson and the week 3 lesson. During the duration of data collection, scores either decreased or remained equal from week to week.

The highest pre-performance score on the NM (7.4) was produced in the week 2 lesson, and the lowest (4.2) was produced in week 12. Within the span of the data, the reported NM scores indicated a maximum reduction of 3.2. The largest change (-1.2) from week-to-week also occurred between the week 2 lesson and the week 3 lesson. On two occasions during data collection (week 9 to week 10, and week 12 to week 13), NM scores indicated an increase of nervousness. The causes of these increases were not determined. In the remaining weeks of data collection, nervousness either decreased or remained equal from week to week.

Qualitative Results

Table 2. *Start of Class*

Comment	Frequency	Type
I like this class.	105	+
I like speaking to my friends in English.	39	+
I'm getting used to this class.	31	+
I'm not good at speaking English.	27	-
I'm tired.	22	N
I like English.	17	+
I don't like to speak in public.	8	-

Note. + = positive; - = negative; N = neutral.

Table 2 shows a summary of start-of-class comments collected from students' surveys. Organizing the seven start-of-class comment types, there were four variants of positive comments, two variants of negative comments, and one comment was categorized as neutral. Of the total amount of comments produced (248), 191 were positive (77%), 35 were negative (14%), and 22 were neutral (8%). As the term progressed, the number of positive comments increased.

Table 3 shows a summary of pre-performance comments collected from students' surveys. Students wrote six variants of negative comments, four variants of positive comments, and two neutral-type comments. Of the total amount of comments submitted (225), 123 were negative (54%), 73 were positive (32%), and 29 were neutral (12%). As the term progressed, the frequency of negative comments decreased. There were more variations of pre-performance comments (12) compared with start-of-class comments (seven).

Table 3. *Pre-Performance*

Comment	Frequency	Type
I liked today's class.	34	+
I'm not good at speaking in public.	34	-
I can't speak English well.	33	-
I don't like to speak in public.	29	-
I'm getting used to this class.	23	+
I prefer group tasks.	18	N
I'm shy.	11	N
I don't have confidence.	9	-
English is difficult.	9	-
I'm afraid to make a mistake.	9	-
I want to speak English well.	8	+
I like speaking English.	8	+

Note. + = positive; - = negative; N = neutral.

Discussion and Implications

Data produced from the NM tracking system suggest that participants' anxiety decreased, with the most significant decrease occurring between weeks 2 and 3. Over the course of the term, the number of positive comments increased, and the number of negative comments decreased. There were more variations of comments related to pre-performance anxiety (12) than to start-of-class anxiety (seven). The quantitative results show that Japanese ELL speaking anxiety is consistently higher prior to performance than at the start of class. Throughout the term, positive comments occurred at a higher rate at the start of class and negative comments occurred at a higher rate pre-performance. These qualitative findings align with the quantitative data results which indicated that anxiety levels are higher at the pre-performance stage of the lesson. The qualitative data collected in this study also suggest that Japanese ELLs prefer collaborative group activities over individual oral presentations. Comments indicating anxiety related to individual speeches (e.g., "I don't like speaking in public," "I'm not good at speaking in public," etc.) occurred 71 times. These findings support the conclusions of Woodrow (2006), who reported that "giving oral presentations and performing in front of classmates were the most reported stressors for in-class situations" (p. 322).

The ramifications of Japanese ELL speaking anxiety in the university classroom are twofold. First, language anxiety directly impacts cognitive processing in the second language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Second, compared with Western students, particularly Americans, Japanese emotionality can be less obvious and more difficult for NS teachers to recognize (Matsumoto, 1991; Matsumoto et al., 2002). Japanese ELLs might be too shy to verbalize their concerns, so the NM provides a written platform to promote effective communication between the instructor and Japanese ELLs. Instructor-to-student interaction is a crucial factor in alleviating learner anxiety (Ohata, 2005), so the identification of these anxiety levels is partially the responsibility of the NS English instructor.

Reducing speaking anxiety in the classroom was not the central thesis of this paper. However, it should be noted that the researcher observed a positive response while students were completing the NM. Further research is needed to test the possible palliative effects of the NM itself, but one explanation could be the NM's journaling component. Writing positive comments, such as "I like this class," could be categorized as "gratitude journaling" (Flinchbaugh, Moore, Chang, & May, 2011). Flinchbaugh et al. concluded that students who implemented gratitude journaling "showed a heightened level of meaningfulness and engagement in the classroom" (p. 191). Raised pre-performance anxiety could have been a factor in the larger variations of pre-performance comments.

Conclusion

Quantitative data produced from the NM suggest that Japanese ELL anxiety does decrease without intervention, and increases most significantly between the first and second weeks of data collection. Qualitative data confirmed previous research by Woodrow (2006), which suggested that ELLs prefer collaborative group activities over individual oral presentations. The existence of Japanese ELL anxiety is an important factor that might go unrecognized by NS English teachers. The NM can help NS English instructors to detect levels of Japanese ELL speaking anxiety. This study is unique in that it has attempted to expand the notion of nervousness beyond a yes-or-no construct. If an individual is nervous it might be helpful to consider how nervous they are. Future research is needed to determine whether the quantification of nervousness might prove effective in decreasing nervousness itself. Furthermore, the quantification of nervousness might help to identify where peak performance occurs and/or where nervousness begins to deter performance.

Acknowledgement

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Jonathan Shachter is a full-time lecturer of English at Kyushu Sangyo University. He holds a B.A. in Trumpet Performance from Virginia Tech and a M.Ed. in Education from American College of Education. His current research interests are the effects of nervousness on performance and cognition. He can be contacted at jonathanshachter@gmail.com.

Appendix

Nervousness Metric (NM)

Age:

年齢:

Male（男）/ Female（女）

On a scale of 1 – 10, 1 being totally relaxed and 10 being extremely nervous, how much anxiety do you have now? Please fill in the appropriate box.

　10段階評価で、1は非常にリラックスしている状態、10は非常に緊張している状態だとすると、今のあなたの状態はどの程度になりますか?該当する番号に丸をつけてください。

Class Start

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

(Totally relaxed)　　　　　　　　　　　*(Extremely nervous)*
（非常にリラックスしている）　　　（非常に緊張している）

Comments:
コメント:

Pre-Performance

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Comments:
コメント:

ARTICLES

JALT PRAXIS

JALT FOCUS