

# Language Anxiety Reduction Techniques for the Japanese College EFL Classroom

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## **Introduction**

With the increasing demand for Japanese students to obtain a more dynamic and well-rounded English ability, both from educational institutions and employers alike, there is an increasing demand for students to become proficient at conversation in the classroom, in turn pressuring educational bodies to pursue a more communicative approach to EFL teaching (Kikuchi, 2009). As a society steeped in the philosophical precepts of Confucianism, the average Japanese student is traditionally educated through the tenets of collectivism, and high power distance between student and teacher, whereas English speaking cultures tend to exhibit the opposite traits; individualism and low power distance between student and teacher (Triandis, 2001). This cultural disparity between languages, combined with a multitude of motivational and language-anxiety based factors, further driven by increasing performance pressure, has created a unique and challenging situation for current EFL educators in Japan.

This paper will briefly research on language anxiety and motivation, specific to the Japanese EFL classroom, and look at current challenges facing EFL educators in compulsory or credit-based programs. From there, the paper will focus on practical and proven classroom techniques to overcome some of the motivational and anxiety induced challenges that can inhibit progress and proficiency, particularly for university students in mandatory EFL programs will be focussed on. By breaking down traditional barriers of teacher-centred learning, and focussing on student-teacher rapport, this study seeks to outline a holistic and proactive approach to the growing challenges faced by a new breed of EFL teachers in Japan.

## **Language Anxiety and Motivational Issues in EFL**

It has been many years since Lambert (1955) observed that motivation to

learn another language involves a need for emotional attachment to the community or language environment in question. With this in mind, it is of no surprise that Japanese EFL students have continued to rate poorly in comparative studies with other Asian nations on English proficiency (Nakata, Okumura, 2001). Due to Japan's history of relative seclusion, yet complex, and heterogenous culture and language, the motivation of the average Japanese student to master English has long been fraught with obvious 'hurdles' (Nakata, Okumura, 2001). Although little has changed in terms of culture, Japan's educational policy makers and employers have placed increasing emphasis on communicative English in classrooms (Kikuchi, 2009). While a positive step in the right direction for EFL reform, the decision to increase communicative education in the classroom cannot automatically translate to an increase in the average student's motivation and performance (Kikuchi, 2009). The resulting malalignment between intention and reality leaves the average English teacher in Japan with unique challenges, particularly in terms of language anxiety and motivation.

### **The Teacher's Role**

As Dornyei (1994), a pioneer in the study of language learning motivation, has pointed out, the individuals' motivational complex is very deep and rooted in many aspects of a student's learning situation, each of which require independent consideration. Equally, language anxiety, unique to other forms of anxiety, has its own subset of triggering factors that need specific attention (Osboe, Fujimura & Hirschel, 2007).

Research into these factors has given the EFL community great insight into how students and teachers can work best to increase performance. However, for the average EFL educator, the most practical solutions are never easily executed; especially in cases of mandatory programs with moderate to large student numbers (Cottam, 2015). The obvious lack of intrinsic, integrative and instrumental motivation that accompanies any student obliged to take a course they did not choose can lead to an increase in situational language anxiety, resulting in poor student performance (Nakata, Okumura, 2001). Therefore, it is the teacher's role, as previously suggested by Williams & Andrade (2008), to take the necessary steps to alleviate anxiety, and increase motivation where possible. To do this, it is crucial for the teacher to firstly have a thorough knowledge of exactly who their students

are, and how those students view their own education.

### **Collectivism and Group Activities**

In a general EFL learner setting, it is virtually impossible to ascertain one common emotional or intrinsic factor that motivates students to learn English. However, in the case of a mandatory course, there is one external factor that may motivate every student; simply put, the desire to receive a passing credit for the course can be a student's strongest motivational factor when beginning a course. As intrinsic motivation is the best way by which students will achieve progress (Dornyei, 1994), it is of importance to focus on developing students' own will to learn, beyond external factors alone. This can be initiated by giving students a clear reflection of their goals; simply by reiterating their own purpose through dialog and group feedback. This initial dialog of brainstorming and sharing goals can be a good way to initially initiate student interaction.

This collectivist idea, while not necessarily appropriate in all natural English speaking classroom environments, is crucial in Japanese settings, and can be a highly useful tool in helping to fuel students' performance in all aspects of their study (Triandis, 1994). Comments like, "I'm just doing this course for credit" or, "I'm only doing this course because I have to", while not optimally positive, may provide some common ground for students to interact. Further still, as a teacher, letting the students know that you know and accept their intentions can help begin the process of rapport building, and acceptance of their new learning environment, with the goal being a student who is more intrinsically aligned to the course goals and teacher's requests.

The positive modifying influence of collectivism and group activity in the Japanese classroom, is equally evident in motivation, as it is in the case of language anxiety (Nakata, Okumura, Osboe, Fujimura & Hirschel, 2007). For this reason, group activities should dominate the EFL classroom, while the groups themselves should be constantly changed. The condition of continual flux in social interaction is a habit that EFL teachers should be persistent in facilitating (Cottam, 2015). As with all basic habits, consistency is a central theme in classroom activities.

## Habit Forming

In the author's experience with peer observation of English lessons in Japan, instructors often overlook the seemingly simple concept of consistency in class delivery. While following simple habits may seem juvenile to the newer, native English teacher, their formulation helps to contribute to a sense of duty, and is a culturally recognizable concept (Triandis, 1994). At the university level, for example, a university teacher in a native English institution may find it condescending to lay strict rules on students' personal actions in the classroom.

But the same should not be assumed in the case of Japanese students. Some basic habits that can greatly affect the performance of a class include:

### Strict rules for use of personal belongings

Student items such as bags and electronic equipment should be placed in an unused area of the room, and maintained daily.

### A seating plan for students and furniture that reflects the aims of the lesson

Seating plans, ideally, will help to stimulate social interaction, while giving students easy visibility of the board (Nevara & Greisamer, 2012). Pair and group placement are ideal for communication tasks, while space for the teacher to move around can facilitate student monitoring, and help foster personal interaction with the teacher.

### A clear and consistent plan for use of the board

While technology has gradually reinvented the classroom in recent years, the board remains a focal point for students in any classroom, helping them to receive visual stimulus in real time. Beyond this though, the board can act as a platform to guide students through the lesson, and as a reassurance of their goals. Using clear headings reminds students of their purpose (Cottam, 2014). A lesson schedule also helps both students and teachers understand and follow timing of the class (Cottam, 2014). Further still, setting up tasks as process, and providing step-by-step instructions can save time and energy for classes of all level (Cottam, 2014).

### Consistency with homework (both setting and checking) (ref)

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Due to the demanding nature of second language acquisition, effective time is required to learn and acquire a multitude of skills that compose an effective communicator (Provenzano & Yue, 2011).

As opposed to a full immersion course, a typical EFL lesson does not allow enough time can be given to facilitate effective acquisition, therefore homework should play an essential role in the lives of EFL students. How and when this homework is assigned and checked can have dramatic effects on the efficacy of students' outside the classroom (Provenzano & Yue, 2011). Some typical ways to help generate effective homework from students, especially those with little motivation, can include setting practical tasks, setting small and enjoyable tasks such as interest reading, setting aside time each class to check the assigned homework, and most importantly, having students use their homework in class to elicit further communication on the topic (Robb & Susser, 1989). Using homework in class gives students a chance to pre-think communication tasks. This is a helpful strategy with beginner students that may suffer a stronger sense of language anxiety (Williams & Andrade, 2008).

### **Teacher-student rapport**

The theme of 'consistency' when teaching EFL in Japan should undoubtedly extend to the teachers own behaviour, particularly in their relationship with other students as a form of anxiety reduction (Kimura, Nakata & Okumura, 2001). While Brown (2007) and other many other communicative teaching advocates suggest a high level of student talk time, the role of teacher talk should not be dismissed.

Further still, setting strict guidelines for teacher talk can stifle spontaneity and the chance for good rapport building situations, specifically when the importance of building student-teacher relationships is not integrated into the teacher's practice.

Kimura et. al (2001) concluded through research that a "narrow pedagogic view" by teachers is counterintuitive to classroom motivation (pg. 61). Likewise, the human aspect of the relationship between student and teacher when facilitating language learning should be not be dismissed or limited in importance (Kimura et. al, 2001).

Key considerations for college level teachers may include the age, gender, cultural background, and work/study schedule of their students. In practice, all of these things are crucial to consider if a teacher is determined to reach an appropriate level of rapport with their student (Davis, 2003). The appropriate action for the teacher, therefore, is to retrieve this information from students. Simply asking questions, or better still, using surveys and keeping a student profile can help teachers remember important facts that will assist with everything from basic conversation, to understanding and helping with a student's progress.

### **Humour and L1 as a tangible asset in class cohesion**

Use of Codeswitching (switching between both L1 and L2) has been shown to provide obvious benefits for students of L2 (Sert, 2005). Within the context of codeswitching, using humor in the classroom may prove to be a practice that, while subjective in nature, can provide proof of good student-teacher relationships.

Nguyen (2007) has pointed out the difficulty in tangibly analyzing the role of humor in the classroom. In a Japanese EFL setting, inability for a teacher to find a role for humor may indicate an inability to identify with the students' personalities. However, cultural differences most likely serve as a more pervasive barrier in most cases for native teachers. With this in mind, it should be in every teacher's interest to interpret the culture and associated humor of that culture. While non-native teachers have their own authentic voice in this regard, native teachers are lucky enough to be somewhat free from the traditional expectations of Japanese relationships. Therefore using humor and creating a more horizontal power structure by talking directly with students in their own language, and about their own interest topics, can provide powerful motivation to further students' willingness to communicate, while breaking down situational anxiety; specifically that of dealing with a student-teacher relationship (Dornyei 1994, Neuliep, 2000). Essentially, opening up social dialog with students on matters not associated with the pedagogic goals at hand, could be considered essential to the rapport building process for native teachers.

### **Conclusion**

As Japan moves toward a more global perspective in matters of education, Japanese EFL students have been thrust toward a more communicative style of

English-based learning and testing (Kikuchi, 2009). In the process, EFL teachers are being forced to pay more attention to maximizing their students' communication in class, thereby increasing the potential for language based anxiety. To add to this concern, the increase in percentage of students studying English can be attributed to mandatory programs; potentially adding motivational issues to an already challenging classroom dynamic.

Japanese students hold a distinct set of cultural traits that can initially appear to act as a barrier to successful English communication. However, traits such as the tendency towards collectivism can be harnessed to help produce non-threatening environments and harmonious relationships within the class.

Japanese student lives entail a comparatively rigorous amount of drilling and habitual tasks. Building habits into a class situation, however seemingly unnatural, can provide the kind of consistency that students expect, and giving the teacher a more controllable classroom environment to facilitate.

Lastly, interaction with EFL teachers, particularly native instructors, provides a unique opportunity for students to interact in a more low power-distance role, essentially allowing the teacher's position to extend beyond that of an authority figure (Neuliep, 2000).

The positive effect of the low power-distance on student anxiety levels can be linked to a reduction in situational anxiety. Hopefully, more qualitative analysis of the scope and effects of such behavior, particularly in a Japanese mandatory EFL context, will be pursued in future studies (Osboe et. al, 2007).

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## Abstract

This paper provides a clear set of practical ideas for language anxiety reduction in the classroom, while also exploring the importance of student-teacher cohesion that can be developed through rapport building approaches. Intrinsic motivation, a major component of any EFL student's success, requires teachers to apply a variety of non-conventional approaches, particularly in the case of false beginner students entering mandatory EFL courses with little motivation. By exploring the root cause of students' behavior on entering such courses, this paper demonstrates how a proactive approach can produce highly positive outcomes for the individual student, and their class micro-culture.

*Keywords:* Language anxiety, motivation, student-teacher rapport

本論文では、調和した関係を作るアプローチを通して形成される学生と教員の団結の重要性を追求するとともに、授業中の言語不安を軽減するための実践的で明確なアイデアについて述べています。内因的動機づけはEFLコースの学生が成功するのに重要な要素であり、特にモチベーションが低く義務的にEFLコースに入った、本来初心者ではない学生の場合、教員は様々な非会話的アプローチを用いる必要があります。本論文では、それらのコースに入った学生の態度の根本的原因を探ることで、積極的な取り組みがどのようにして個々の生徒、そしてクラス全体の「文化」として非常に前向きな結果を引き出すことができるのかについて述べています。