The Effects of Social Anxiety on English Language Learning in Japan

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Unlike typical North Americans (Alicke, 1985; Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995) Japanese tend to be self-effacing and self-critical, blaming themselves for their failures more than they applaud themselves for their successes (Brown, 2003a; Brown, Gray, and Ferrara, 2003; Heine, Kitayama, & Lehman, 2001; Kurman, 2001; Kurman & Sriram, 2002; Kurman, Yoshihara-Tanaka, & Elkoshi, 2003; Norasakkunkit, & Kalik, 2002).). A self-effacing attributional style in turn is known to be negatively related to a number of personality traits, such as self-esteem, and positively related to others, including trait social anxiety (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). Anxiety in general is known to be detrimental to performance on tasks that require attention and deliberate effort (Roccas & Brewer, 2002)—such as learning a foreign language.

Trait social anxiety most commonly occurs in people who are self-focused and who have unrealistic self-expectations, who desire to make positive self-presentations but fear that they will fail to do so, and that their interpersonal goals will be impeded as a result (Vertue, 2003, citing Leary, 2001c). It is more common in collectivistic cultures, such as Japan is often depicted to be (however see Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002, Matsumoto,1999; Takano & Osaka 1999; Voronov and Singer, 2002 for opposing views) and manifests most often in situations that are unstructured, novel, ambiguous, and involve strangers (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). Together, these sound very much like the typical Japanese EFL college student.[1]

Aversive affective states regarding English are not uncommon among Japanese EFL students. Burden (2002) reports that 75% of a convenience sample of 1,057 middle school, high school, and college students claimed to feel embarrassed (*terekusai*) speaking English in front of others (the question didn't specify what kind of others). In my less extensive convenience sample of 210 first year college students (more fully described in Brown 2003b), 58% claimed to feel apprehensive (*shinpai*), anxious (*fuan*), and nervous (*kinchou*) about studying English. Fifteen percent claimed not to, and 22% weren't sure. Students expressed their degree of agreement using a seven step Likert type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Taken as a class, the mean rating for this item was 4.98 ($SD = 1.52$). This differs from the scale midpoint of 4 (t (210) = 9.04, $p < .0001$), suggesting the prevalence of a range of negative affective states regarding English among this group of students. Another relevant item on the same questionnaire (more fully described in Brown, 2003b) was "speaking English in public makes me feel shy and self-conscious (*hazukashii*). More than twice as many agreed as disagreed (53% versus 24%) and 23% were unsure ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.70$). The mean for this item also differed significantly from the scale midpoint (t (209) = 4.97, $p < .0001$), indicating that in addition to being apprehensive, anxious, nervous, and embarrassed either about learning or speaking English, or both, many students are shy and self-conscious about using it in public.

The data do not directly address the reason for these negative feelings about English, but it is not difficult to guess that students are concerned that they will make mistakes and be negatively viewed as a result. Students

fear making public mistakes when speaking and in general are highly motivated to avoid failure, even if that means avoiding success (Miyake & Yamazaki, 1995, cited in Kurman, Yoshihara-Tanaka, & Elkoshi, 2003). Those who score higher on trait social anxiety would probably be even more concerned and hence less likely to risk using English in public.

Trait social anxiety is strongly predicted by Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE), which can impede learning in a variety of ways (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). The most obvious is that students who fear and anticipate negative evaluation will tend to avoid doing things that will cause them to be negatively evaluated. But these may be the very things that they need to do to learn English. As Matsuda & Gobel (2001, p. 230) point out, "…. oral classroom activities….[are]….some of the most problematic and anxiety-provoking activities for foreign language students". More generally, highly anxious students "tend to endorse activities that limit risk (and may limit learning too)" (Ehrman, 1996). Note the assumption that making a mistake in English is something that will be negatively evaluated, rather than accepted as a normal and not blameworthy aspect of foreign language acquisition, and of learning in general.

If students are avoiding doing what they need to do to learn because they anticipate and fear negative evaluation, it might be possible to promote learning by eliminating the fear of evaluation simply by eliminating the evaluation. The specific form of negative evaluation that students seem to fear most is the real or imaged ridicule of their peers. They do not seem to mind very much being negatively evaluated for other types of classroom performance, for example poor attendance. And in fact, some students will gladly accept the certainty of negative evaluation in the form of bad grades for poor attendance or class participation rather than risk the possibility of being negatively evaluated (i.e., laughed at) by their peers for making a public mistake.

Student concerns however are not limited to making mistakes in public. They may also be concerned about standing out and appearing to show off their abilities (if they have them). One who displays one's knowledge conspicuously (even it appears, when requested to do so in a context where such displays are expected) is regarded in Japan as immodest, and immodesty is a negatively valued trait/behavior in Japan (Brown, 2003c). Students themselves believe that "a capable hawk hides his talons" (*no aru taka wa tsume o kakusu* [Brown, 2003c]), and may not even be aware that they are being modest, since the norm for modest self-presentation is apparently internalized between the second and fifth years of primary school (Yoshida, Kojo, & Kaku, 1982, cited in Kurman, 2001). Students are caught in a double-bind: if they make a mistake, they risk ridicule; if they answer correctly, they risk ostracism. No wonder many prefer to remain silent.

Most native speaker (NS) English teachers, according to recent studies (Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001), prefer communicative instructional methods, in which, among other things, oral productive communication is the central concern and learners are expected to participate actively in class, including such behaviors as demonstrating ignorance by asking questions (or so students seem to believe). Students may genuinely believe that other students already know the answer to the question that they want to ask. Students however, unlike the NS teachers, seem to prefer, or at least feel more comfortable with, the more traditional teacher centered approaches (Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001, pp. 86-87). It is not difficult to see why they would. The traditional methods allow students to remain inconspicuous and to avoid making public mistakes, because they are not asked to perform in public.

The solution may be to reduce the performance pressure many students experience simply by not asking them to "perform" English in front of the typically large class. This pressure to perform in itself is apt to make

most students uncomfortable, as it singles them out from the others. Making public speaking voluntary would simply increase the extent to which a student is judged to be "showing off".

Speaking in small groups may be less intimidating for many students, but for those who are both high in fear of negative evaluation, as the majority appear to be (Brown, 2003c), and lack confidence in their English speaking capabilities, even one potentially critical peer may be enough to cow them into silence. For such students, any attempts to induce them to publically perform prematurely may prove to be counterproductive and rather than motivating them to speak, may motivate them simply to avoid the class, thereby missing out on opportunities to develop receptive capabilities. Obviously, this generalization does not apply to the minority with low FNE, those with confidence in their speaking capabilities and little concern for how their peers will judge them, and for students with high FNE, no confidence, and great concern for peer evaluation, but who simply push ahead anyway. These students will learn no matter what happens in or out of the classroom. Most students do not fit this description however, and may benefit from an emphasis on receptive skills in large introductory classes.

Teachers can remind themselves that the road to English fluency is a long and often tortuous one. Communication is of course the ultimate objective for many students, but communication is not limited to oral production. Listening, reading, and writing are also forms of communication and no less important than speaking. Listening skills in fact are as essential as, if not more so than, speaking skills (in that one can choose which words one will use, but not which words one's interlocutor will use). Emphasizing listening in large introductory classes may be one way to reduce fear of negative evaluation, and the debilitating anxiety that prevents many students from participating and learning.

Notes

1. It goes without saying that even in Japan students can vary widely in the abilities, motivational intensity, willingness to expend effort, and of course in their anxieties as well. Anxiety may simply be a normal feature of student psychological functioning. A majority (74%) of first year students in two level 4 (highly advanced) classes one at one university in Yokohama recently (April 2003) reported feeling anxious and apprehensive about studying English, despite the fact that all of them were already highly proficient (91% had spent anywhere from one year to more than ten years in American, British, Australian, or international schools). They did not differ in either intensity or in extent of their anxiety and apprehensiveness from level 1 students (50% of whom had had brief periods of foreign travel). These data are discussed in greater detail in a study in preparation. What I am suggesting in the present article is merely that for some students, a particular component (fear of negative evaluation) of a particular type of anxiety (social anxiety) can have a deleterious effect on particular learning outcomes, if it interferes with their partcipation in essential learning activities. In other cases, student's learning objectives may not be adversely affected even by very high levels of anxiety.

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