

Managing Language Anxiety Through Task-Based Learning

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Abstract

This paper addresses the problems of language learning and test anxiety through frequent use of oral exams and the teaching methods and strategies that may be utilized to reduce them. The nature of the problems of language and test anxiety and the methods to reduce them were explored using a questionnaire. The results and some of the pedagogical implications are considered briefly at the end of the paper.

Acknowledgements

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Background

In my previous paper published in this journal last year, I researched about task-based learning and its affect on student anxiety, motivation and cooperative learning. The goal of the paper was to explore the effectiveness of task based activities for increasing class participation on a continual basis. Initially, the task based activities were implemented as a more precise assessment tool for class participation for each student, and were presented to students as tests that would be evaluated at the end of a lesson. Unbeknown to the student was the reason for implementing "the test" was to increase classroom participation through speaking drills and conversation practice. My previous paper presented the reasons for using task-based learning and the affective factors of employing such methods specifically the increase of language and test anxiety. However, the

shortcoming of that paper was that it was mostly academic regarding my own observations of what I perceived to be happening within the classroom and among students. To truly understand the mentality of the students regarding language learning anxiety and task based activities, I designed a questionnaire to answer some of the questions posed at the end of my research.

The Questionnaire

For this reason the questionnaire was designed to assess the attitudes and beliefs of English task-based methods from the students' perspectives. It was comprised of twenty questions whose purpose was to measure reactions regarding the English speaking activities used in class; the language anxiety associated with such activities; and the means by which students reduce anxiety through learning strategies and collaborative learning during assessments.

The questionnaire has several shortcomings. Several flaws made known to me after it was employed by a colleague who recently finished graduate school. Responses from students would probably have been easier to categorize using a Likert scale than the multi-choice method that I used. In doing my own study on designing questionnaire, I realized that the wording of certain topics also could have been worded more accurately which would have elicited different results. Another flawed feature is in the grouping of the questions. A few of the questions are not ordered properly and I realized that some of the questions did not logically follow one another. Two questions in particular, 5 and 12, could have been worded better to attain better responses. In addition to near redundancy of the question, is the order in which the two were placed. These would have served better if they were placed near the end of the questionnaire as they summarize not only the questionnaire, but the efforts the students have made as it was presented to the students near the end of the semester. Therefore, the results of questions 5 and 12 are placed at the end of paper before the conclusion.

The questionnaire was originally written in English and translated into Japanese for the students.

Types of Speaking Tests Administered

The speaking tests that presented to the students ranged from conversations which would take place from 1 to 3 minutes. Some of the tests were conversations taken from the text book. Students memorized topical conversations for talking about their daily life, their routines, free time activities, shopping, and cuisine. For other tests students needed to create their own conversation with a partner and spoke about their present life and schedule; talking about a recent past event such as a weekend or a summer vacation. These short one-to-two minute speaking activities led to preparation for the students' final exams. The final exam of the school year is conducted from mid to late January with the students working in pairs and designing their own conversations. Topics discussed were the New Year Holidays (by using the simple past tense); their study and work schedules in the midst of preparation for their final exams (by using the simple present tense and the present progressive); and their plans for the approaching spring vacation (using the future

tense). Considering the breath of topics discussed, the final exam usually took three to five minutes to conduct for each group.

Participants

All the participants were students at Kinjo Gakuin University, an all women university, and all students were non-English majors. The university requires that all students outside of the international communication department and the English Literature department to complete two years of English study. Students were first year and second year students. The first year students comprised of standard and advanced students enrolled the English Communication A and B courses. The first-year students had various majors as multi-disciplinary psychology, environmental design, modern childhood education, and nutrition. The second year students were enrolled in the English Communication C and D standard course. These students majored in nutrition and Japanese literature.

Overall, 123 questionnaire samples were gathered. There was a small number of students who actually skipped the second page as it was copied on the back of the first. Thus, the results for the second page totaled to around 117 to 119.

The Questionnaire Results

Below are the results of the questionnaire. The item sought to be measured for each question is stated and the responses of the students are presented in percentages. For most of the questions, the academic, linguistic and psychological basis is also briefly explained. In addition to this, the pedagogical implications of the results are often expressed for each question. For a more thorough explanation please refer to initial paper published last year. A copy of the questionnaire and the student results are found at the appendix of this paper.

Question 1 addressed the perceived difficulties of the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Students were asked, regarding the four, which one was the most difficult. One item that I did not list for this question was a choice which encompassed all the language skills together. Some of the students expressed that each skill bore equal difficulty in their language study, and selected all of them. I modified the questionnaire with a fifth choice: all of the above. Of the students polled, 34% stated that speaking was the most difficult skill, listening received 28%, writing 21%, and reading 8%. The added category of all the skills being equally difficult received 11%. These results coincide with Horwitz's research regarding that amongst language learning activities, speaking causes the highest anxiety when compared with listening and reading activities (2001).

Question 2 sought to measure which was perceived more stressful by the students: taking a paper test or speaking English. The majority of students (66%) stated that speaking English was

more stressful than taking a regular test (34%). Knowing that both these factors produce anxiety should cause concern for language teachers, and it is important to implement steps to lower students' anxiety, especially when the two are combined. Debilitative anxiety has been noted as being the one affective factor that thwarts the learning process (Dornyei, 2005). Knowing that debilitative anxiety is an impediment, it needed to be ascertained if the students were experiencing facilitative anxiety during the task based learning activities.

Question 3 sought to measure the effect of anxiety on individual performance. Students were asked "In your experience, does being nervous help improve your speaking ability of lower your ability to speak?" 70% of the students expressed that being nervous negatively influenced their performance; while 10% said that their performance actually improved; and 20% said that being nervous had no affect on their language performance. Only a small number of students found that being "nervous" achieved facilitative anxiety as that emotional state enhanced their speaking during testing. Through the task based speaking tests being used, it may be possible to reduce the test anxiety through employing a different means, such as having students independently record their conversations as they work in pairs.

Question 4 and 6 sought to find out the most preferred method of the students for taking speaking exams. The majority of students (67%) stated that speaking with other students was favored over speaking with the teacher (16%), speaking within a group (13%) or speaking individually (4%). For question 6, the students stated that speaking with other students produced the least anxiety (77%) when compared with speaking with the teacher (16%) or individually (7%). As questions 4 and 6 demonstrate, testing students in pairs or in groups, according to the students, is their preferred method of being examined and also produces the least anxiety of the three ways presented to students. This coincides with Ricart's observation and the reason for speaking exams done in groups as it seemed to be the least stressful for students (2013).

Questions 5 will be addressed later in this paper as it pertains to the students individual evaluate their current language ability with question 12.

Question 7 Language Strategies

According to Noormohamdi (2009,) language learning strategies for anxiety are the least used by students of foreign languages, especially for oral examinations. Therefore, it is beneficial to the students that instructors promote strategies to reduce anxiety. Question 7 mentioned a small number of such practices, but they were the predominant ones that were frequently used. The strategies were deep breathing, words of encouragement, giving the option of standing or sitting for a speaking exam, and encouraging students to speak in louder voices. The students stated that encouraging words from the teacher and from other students relieved anxiety the most (38%),

followed by deep breathing (31%). As students had a great deal of nervous energy, some stated that speaking in a loud voice was the most useful (15%), while also due to anxiety, some students preferred to stand during the speaking tests (9%). For this question, students were also given the option of writing their individual strategy of lowering anxiety and these students (7%) stated that practicing frequently with their partners was the best strategy they could utilize.

The results of this question leads to further research of the preferred strategies of having support through encouragement of one's peers and the teacher. In hindsight, these two factors, words of encouragement from the teacher, and words of encouragement from the students, each merited their own separate question to discover a more accurate measurement of what provides better support for students. The results of such a question could influence managing the task of reducing anxiety much easier. For example, if the students are more effective in providing encouragement, it would be advantageous for the teacher to foster this supportive behavior among them and defer to them rather than make an attempt to encourage. Another question to be investigated is if the language partners provide words of encouragement or do other classmates who are outside of the pair. This question would explore if encouragement comes from other groups or friends within the classroom. The results would give insight into classroom dynamics by understanding how cohesive not just pairs are but different groups and their influence on managing anxiety and promoting success.

Question 8 The Role of the Teacher

For this question, students were asked the questions how they viewed the teacher during testing: a judge, a coach, a friend, or another role. This was a personally interesting discovery for me. Due to the encouragement that I sought to provide students during the pre-examination preparation, I had thought that the choice for the role of "coach" would receive a much higher percentage than received. My activities in preparing the students usually involved visiting each pair at their seat; giving advice; checking pronunciation; clarifying lexical and grammatical usage; and tending to other related issues. Despite this, 72% of the students still viewed the teacher's role as a judge during the examination period. It is clear that during examinations, the teacher's role is primarily one of a judge, a fact that did not escape the students being tested. However, the students' results may be attributed to the traditional role of the teacher and therefore may be very difficult to view the teacher as "coach" or "friend". However, for the teacher who is seeking to lower student anxiety, it is important that the image of the teacher as a judge be altered partially if not entirely. If that can be achieved, it will have a positive outcome in lowering language and test anxiety; thus improving the language learning process.

Other data from question 8 stated that 17% of the students thought that the teacher was a coach, while 13% viewed the teacher as a friend. The fourth choice allowed students to write individually about the role of the teacher. 3% responded to this question. One student wrote that during the exam, she does her best to ignore the teacher and focus on the task at hand as considering the

teacher would increase her anxiety. Others stated that the teacher was an English professional and that the teacher played no special role during the test.

Question 9. The results of question 9 to some degree level off the results of question 8. This question asks the student "Do you believe that the teacher wanted you to succeed in your speaking test or wanted you to fail?" Another choice could have measured if the teacher was neutral about the students' success or failure. However, all the students who participated in answering the questionnaire (with the exception of one) stated that the teacher desired for them to succeed. If the teacher is viewed primarily as a judge, the results of questions 9 reveal that the judge is neither impartial nor apathetic to the challenges that the students face during a speaking test.

Question 11 This question addressed the teacher's role of providing feedback when mistakes were made. 41% of the students stated that feedback was always given, while 42% stated that it was often given. 12% stated that it was sometimes given and 5% stated that it was never given. For teaching purposes these results are useful as they inform the teacher about how effective feedback is given and received by the students. It should also be determined in the future if a relationship exists between the role of the teacher as either "judge" or "friend" due to providing feedback.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Question 10

In my previous paper, I made references to Dr. David Burns work from the *Feeling Good Handbook* (1999), commenting that his work known as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or mood therapy has certain features that could be applied to help language students reduce their anxiety and increase self-confidence. One of the basic principles of this therapy is to challenge thoughts that individuals have that produce negative emotional conditions such as nervousness, fear, anxiety, and panic. Burns states that many negative emotions are caused not by external objects and events, but by the internal thoughts associated with specific objects or occurrences. Understanding some of the basic principles about CBT, I sought to use Burns' method to reduce anxiety by recording and presenting the students' scores from prior task-based learning activities (Ricart, 2012). For many students the belief is held that they cannot speak English, and that it is too difficult adding to the anxiety of speaking test. Therefore, to undo negative attitudes toward English learning, assigning students shorter, more manageable tasks would be essential for them to incrementally experience a sense of success. As stated earlier, the tasks have specific goals such as speaking about daily life, schedules, hobbies, food, sports and other leisure activities. Giving ample time to prepare, the majority of students did well receiving scores from 80% to 95%. These tests are done from the very first lessons of the semester and provide students with a pattern of how they will be assessed throughout the school year.

Therefore, when showing students a record of their previous successes, it will challenge their belief that English is too difficult to learn and reduce the fear of impending failure. Question 10

was designed to measure the affect of presenting students' previous successes on the upcoming tests in order to raise confidence. 72% of the students stated that knowing how they performed on previous exams provided greater confidence in their abilities for taking the forthcoming exam. 26% stated that knowing about their previous success provided some encouragement and 2% stated that knowing past scores did not benefit them at all. The findings of this question, supports Burns findings that if individuals can change the way they think, fears, anxieties, nervousness, and panic can be overcome.

Collaborative Learning

The next series of questions were designed to evaluate the affects of collaborative learning during the task-based activities.

Question 13 asked the question if a student enjoyed working with their fellow classmate. In most instances, the language partner was the same person throughout the school year. Overall most students enjoyed working with their language partners with 58% stating always, and 38%. Stating that they often enjoyed working with their classmates. Only 3% of the students stated that it was not an enjoyable activity. This 3% provides the connection to question 14.

Question 14 resulted in a similar discovery where 96% of the participating students were satisfied with working with the same partner throughout the year. Only 4% stated that they would prefer to work with a different partner. This correlates to the similar percentage of 3% found in question 13 of those students that did not enjoy working with their fellow classmates. Despite this low percentage, it is worth considering for future teaching practice to frequently alter language partners. First, as the students are working in pairs, their success is partially dependent upon their partners' abilities and motivation or the lack thereof. To be assigned such an impaired partner is a disservice to the student who has potential and may be motivated to learn a foreign language. However, many will feel obligated to continue working with a partner with deficient language abilities or desire as it is assumed that they are powerless to change it.

Second, having various partners throughout lessons would enhance the learning environment. Dornyei and Murphey (2003), note the advantages of diversifying language partners by creating a facilitative anxiety with a dynamic expectancy of working with different individuals frequently, and by generating a heightened excitement in the class, and simply reducing boredom (p.86). Despite these benefits, it is important to know that for exams, assigning different language partners would increase both test and language anxiety. If students are not given the opportunity to prepare with their partner it will lead to such debilitating anxiety, but would lead to greater more authentic communication rather than a rehearsed dialogue between students.

Question 15 sought to measure the support one receives from cooperative learning. This is

attributed to the interdependency that is associated with collaborative learning (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). 88% of the students stated that their conversation partner was always supportive and 9% stated that their partners were often supportive. The implication of these results is that the students experienced a kind of emotional support, which reduced anxiety. How the students were supportive is worth exploring in the future. One possible question that arises: "Is by being merely physically present a factor which reduces anxiety?" Others possible questions would explore what specific actions are conducted that express support.

Question 16 sought to focus on the collaborative nature of task based learning by asking if advice or suggestions were given during test preparations. Providing useful feedback between and among students is another feature of cooperative learning as students learn to be accountable to one another as they work toward completion of the task (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). The results showed that the majority of students (58%) stated that advice and suggestions were always given; while 31% stated that it was often given; and 11% stated that it was sometimes given. Only 1% stated that it was never given. Related to this question is question 18.

Question 16 and 18 assessed the positive interdependency and the individual accountability by giving advice. Question 16 differs from 18, in that, 16 addresses suggestions for components of the test other than language. The advice in question 16 relates to body language, gestures, assignment of roles for the conversation, and overall management of the speaking task. Question 18 asked the question asked if the language partners were helpful in learning English. 49% stated that their partner always helped them, while 43% stated that their partners often helped them learn English. A combined 92 % of the students learned from each other providing more opportunities for language learning. Only 7% said that their partners sometimes provided help with English, and 1% claimed that they never did.

Question 17 showed the relationship between group collaboration and responsibility. This question is important as it measures the sense of fairness being held while doing pair work, and if the work is being distributed evenly. The question is important because of the varying language abilities and motivation that potentially exists among the students. If responsibility is not shared, students may have the added burden of not only fulfilling their individual role, but that of their language partners' as well. This disparity between students would increase anxiety for the student, who would then be over compensating for their partner's shortcomings. However despite this, it is good to see that the vast majority of students reported that their partners always or often shared the responsibility of preparing for the test (94%). For some students sometimes responsibility was equally shared (2%). Yet, slightly higher is the percentage of students that said that responsibility was never equally shared (3%).

Question 19 measured face-to-face promotive interaction (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). The question assessed if students recognized that their individual efforts directly influenced not only their

own score but that of their partners. This recognition would be expressed by the efforts made which worked towards the success of the group. 61% said that they always did their best when preparing for a speaking test due to interdependency. 34% said they often did their best and 5% said they sometimes did their best to achieve success.

Question 20 Did you work harder than your partner? This question sought to answer the balance of effort that each pair that collaborated to prepare for the task. The necessity of this question stemmed from the reasons presented in question 17. Furthermore, the question is based upon how students selected their language partners. All the students based their language partner on proximity, and worked with those they sat next to in the classroom. One can only infer that such a decision is based on convenience. Evaluating individual student language ability and motivation based upon class participation, it became obvious that some students were ill matched. The results of question 20 showed that 28% believed that they always worked harder than their partner; 36% often worked harder; 34% sometimes worked harder; and 2% stated they never worked harder than their partners.

Questions 5 and 12: Final Results

Questions 5, 12 relate to how students perceive their language ability near the end of the semester. Both questions are essentially the same. Question 5 "Do you think that your English speaking ability has improved by taking many speaking tests in during the school year?" Question 6: "After taking this class do you think you can speak English better?" I have placed these two at the end of this paper, because it is my overall goal to attempt to change the attitudes that students have regarding English language learning in Japan. My hope is that my efforts in the classroom as a language instructor have demonstrated that speaking English is a realistic possibility for them. My first time in Japan I worked as an assistant English teacher (AET) at three high schools in Aichi prefecture. I was surprised that despite the years of English study in high school that few students had little if no proficiency in speaking English. For this reason, I always seek to promote speaking activities in my class when possible, and for this reason I utilize task based learning activities in the form of tests. I was pleased that many students believed that after the semester that their ability to speak English improved in varying degrees.

Conclusion

The pedagogical applications from the questionnaire are many and further reflection is needed. Although some progress has been made in reducing language anxiety and test anxiety through some of the methods evaluated in the questionnaire, more can be done in lowering it and thereby increasing performance as many of the students admitted how anxiety inhibited their performance during speaking exams. As oral exams need to be administered by teachers, it is more conducive to have students work in groups instead of having them speak with the teacher or individually

perform like make a speech.

There is a need to discover more effective ways to lower debilitating anxiety and promote facilitative anxiety in the classroom. As previous research has shown, and the questionnaire has verified, speaking a foreign language in a classroom setting produces debilitating anxiety coupled with oral examinations. One method which may be employed in the future is the use of video or audio files, where students will record their conversations and send it to the teacher to be evaluated. This would reduce the physical presence of the teacher acting as a "judge" presiding over and determining the academic fate of students. This would also lead to greater autonomy as the students would be able to view their own work and determine the quality of their own work.

As question 10 revealed, it is possible to challenge negative beliefs and thoughts with a positive record of success as it increases student confidence and thereby, lowers anxiety. Burns method of having those experiencing fears and anxiety analyze and look at the validity of such feelings can have far reaching affects for students. When presenting student their record of past successes it can be a useful strategy in overcoming debilitating anxiety.

Regarding collaborative learning and language anxiety, the majority of students stated that they enjoyed working with their partners and is regarded as a pleasant and beneficial experience. However, it will be necessary to explore the challenge of having alternating partners rather practicing with only one throughout the semester. This would result in extending the students language abilities by working with a classmate without rehearsing prior to the test. The sudden random assignment of language partners would undoubtedly increase language learning and performance anxiety as the unpredictability of a test increases. To compensate for this unpredictability students by necessity would practice English sentences with more flexible linguistic structures rather than relying on the rote memorization of a pre-designed conversation, and it would be a more accurate measurement of their language abilities. As Breedlove and Burkett and Windfield (2004) found that random partners without prior collaboration seldom diminishes test anxiety.

Questionnaire

Test Anxiety and Language Anxiety

- | | | |
|--|------|------|
| 1. For which language skill do you feel the most anxiety? Circle one | | |
| a. listening | 34 | 28% |
| b. speaking | 41.5 | 34% |
| c. reading | 8 | 7% |
| d. writing 1 | 26 | 21% |
| e. all skills equally difficult | 13.5 | 11% |
| | 123 | |
| 2. Taking a test creates stress and so does speaking in a foreign language. Of the two choices what causes you to be more nervous? Circle one. | | |
| a. Taking a test | 41.5 | 34% |
| b. Speaking English | 81.5 | 66% |
| | 123 | |
| 3. In your experience when speaking English, does being nervous help you improve your speaking ability or did it lower your ability to speak? Circle one | | |
| a. Improve | 13 | 11% |
| b. Lowered | 86 | 70% |
| c. No influence | 24 | 20% |
| | 123 | 100% |
| 4. When taking an English speaking test, which do you prefer? Circle one | | |
| a. Speaking by yourself | 4.5 | 4% |
| b. Speaking with the Teacher | 19.5 | 16% |
| c. Speaking with another student 1 | 83 | 67% |
| d. Speaking within a group | 16 | 13% |
| | 123 | |
| 5. Do you think that your English speaking ability has improved by taking many speaking tests in during the school year? It improved _____ Circle one | | |
| a. Improved a lot | 16 | 13% |
| b. A little | 103 | 84% |
| c. No improvement | 4 | 3% |
| | 123 | |
| 6. During a test which situation causes you less nervousness? Circle one | | |
| a. Speaking by yourself | 8.5 | 7% |
| b. Speaking with the Teacher | 20 | 16% |
| c. Speaking with another student | 94.5 | 77% |
| | 123 | |

Language learning strategies

- | | | |
|--|------|-----|
| 7. What are some ways that of dealing with anxiety before a speaking test? Which was the most helpful to you? Circle one | | |
| a. Deep breathing | 36.5 | 31% |
| b. Encouraging words from the teacher or friends | 45.5 | 38% |
| c. Standing during the speaking test | 11 | 9% |

d. Speaking in a loud voice	18	15%
e. Other _____	8	7%
	119	100%
8. During speaking tests how did you understand the teacher's role? Circle one		
a. A judge	87	72%
b. A coach	17	14%
c. A friend	13	11%
d. Other _____	4	3%
	121	100%
9. Do you believe that the teacher wanted you to succeed in your speaking test or wanted you to fail? Circle one		
a. Fail	1	
b. Succeed	104	
	105	
10. Did knowing how you did on previous speaking tests give you more confidence to take a speaking test? Circle one		
a. Yes.	84	72%
b. Sometimes	30	26%
c. No it did not.	2	2%
	116	100%
11. When you made mistakes did the teacher give you feedback? Circle one		
a. Always	47	41%
b. Often	48	42%
c. Sometimes	14	12%
d. Never	6	5%
	115	
12. After taking this class do you think you can speak English better? Circle one		
a. Yes	31	26%
b. Yes. A little	81	69%
c. No.	6	5%
	118	100%

Collaborative Learning

13. Did you enjoy working with your fellow classmate? Circle one		
a. Always	68	58%
b. Often	45	38%
c. Sometimes	4	3%
d. Never	117	99%
14. Do you prefer to keep the same classmate to practice English or do you want to speak with different classmates throughout the semester? Circle one		
a. The same classmate	118	96%
b. different classmates	5	4%
	123	100%

15. During the preparation for a speaking test, did your language partner support you? Circle one		
a. Always	108	88%
b. Often	11	9%
c. Sometimes	3	2%
d. Never	1	1%
	123	100%
16. During preparation did your language partner give you advice or make good suggestions? Circle one		
a. Always	71	58%
b. Often	38	31%
c. Sometimes	13	11%
d. Never	1	1%
	123	
17. During preparation did you language partner share the responsibility of the test? Circle one		
a. Always	83	67%
b. Often	33	27%
c. Sometimes	3	2%
d. Never	4	3%
	123	100%
18. During the preparation did your language partner help you to learn more English? Circle one		
a. Always	60	49%
b. Often	53	43%
c. Sometimes	9	7%
d. Never	1	1%
	123	100%
19. Did you study harder because you were working with a classmate and you knew that you had a responsibility to her to try your best? Circle one		
a. Always	75	61%
b. Often	42	34%
c. Sometimes	6	5%
d. Never	123	100%
20. When preparing for the speaking tests did you work harder than your partner? Circle one		
a. Always	34	28%
b. Often	44	36%
c. Sometimes	42	34%
d. Never	3	2%
	123	100%

Thank your taking this questionnaire

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