

Identifying and Learning From a High-Intermediate Class Struggling From Foreign Language Anxiety

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Abstract

Anxiety can have negative effects on student participation in the language classroom, and intervention from the teacher may be required. This paper considers the research into how foreign language anxiety and public speaking anxiety may influence language learners and reflects on a teaching journal of an intermediate English presentation class that may have struggled as a result of their anxiety in the classroom. The class in question struggled with participation in lessons and when they did speak, often spoke very quietly. This was observed in all activities where they were asked to speak in English, and it was particularly problematic during presentations. The author discusses several attempts to address low participation as well as the teacher's process in identifying anxiety as a likely cause of the classes' struggles. While several activities and pieces of feedback were successful in temporarily increasing participation, anxiety and shyness in the classroom continued through the semester. The paper concludes with plans and goals for working with students in future classes that suffer from foreign language anxiety.

Keywords: Anxiety, Presentation, Journal

Introduction

First-year students at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan are required to take an English presentation course during their second semester. They are expected to develop language skills related to organizing and presenting on a variety of topics, and they are also asked to learn skills related to giving an effective presentation, such as maintaining eye contact and controlling their voice to be clear and engaging. While some students thrive and are able to give engaging presentations while easily holding their audience's attention, others struggle with anxiety when asked to speak in a foreign language in front of so many of their peers. This paper reflects on a teaching journal kept for one class where the majority of students never really seemed to be comfortable, despite being a relatively linguistically proficient group.

While linguistic proficiency can be useful as a way for teachers to appropriately match their lessons and goals to the students' abilities, it does not necessarily reflect the students' comfort with using the language. Fear of speaking in public can also cause difficulties for learners regardless of their proficiency and comfort with the language. I started keeping a journal as a result of a class that was the highest proficiency of my presentation classes seeming to struggle to participate and use English in the classroom. My first thoughts questioned their motivation, but this paper will delve into the research that suggests anxiety as a likely cause of the students' struggles and will discuss my process for understanding and trying to help the class in question.

Literature Review

One reasonable expectation for a presentation class is that some students are likely to feel public speaking anxiety. Public speaking anxiety is a common issue for many people (Bartholomay & Houlihan, 2016; Bippus & Daly, 1999; Furukawa et al., 2012; Pull, 2012). Public speaking anxiety is

particularly prevalent among individuals with social anxiety disorder (Furukawa et al., 2012; Pull, 2012) but can also be observed independent of other issues with anxiety (Furukawa et al., 2012; Knappe et al., 2011). Different authors have estimated the prevalence of public speaking anxiety differently. Stein et al. (2010) found public speaking fears in between 9% and 13% of people depending on the location. Furukawa et al. (2012) found 7.3% of junior and senior high school students in one prefecture in Japan. Bartholomay & Houlihan (2016) stated that the most severe form of public speaking anxiety has a prevalence rate of 7%, while 25% to 30% of those in their study demonstrated elevated levels of public speaking anxiety and 50% experienced moderate anxiety related to public speaking.

Public speaking anxiety can have negative effects for those who suffer from it. Bartholomay & Houlihan (2016) noted that public speaking anxiety can be related to lower academic performance and difficulty in employment. Faravelli et al. (2000) explained that avoidance of public speaking is a very common tactic to deal with the anxiety it causes. With the high prevalence of public speaking anxiety, it is reasonable to expect many groups of students to have some struggles with a presentation class where they are expected to speak in front of their classmates.

Foreign language anxiety can make it difficult for learners to participate in a language class, and in some cases, it can affect a learner's ability to acquire the new language (Apple, 2013; Horwitz, 2002; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Ostman & Xethakis, 2021; Pappamihel, 2002; Shachter, 2018; Teimori et al., 2019; Woodrow, 2006; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). Apple (2013) explained that many researchers have insisted that L2 anxiety is the result of low language skills in the learner's L1, whereas others have suggested that anxiety may instead be a cause of low L2 proficiency. Llinás & Garau (2009) observed higher-proficiency students demonstrating more anxiety than lower-proficiency students. MacIntyre et al. (2002) found that students with high levels of anxiety tended to underestimate their abilities, whereas those with low anxiety overestimated themselves. Of particular relevance to the class in question, anxiety among Japanese learners of English has been observed to be higher than that in Western students learning English (Woodrow, 2006). Ostman and Xethkis (2021) also found that first-year university students were particularly prone to foreign language anxiety.

The outcome of foreign language anxiety on learning is not entirely clear in the research. The most common view is that anxiety has a negative influence on learning outcomes (Pappamihel, 2002; Woodrow, 2006; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). However, some authors have found no effect from anxiety (Llinás & Garau, 2009) or have found that when the anxiety is appropriately addressed that differences in achievement can be significantly reduced (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Both Horwitz (2002) and Teimori et al. (2019) noted that anxiety can have negative effects but that it may also have no effect or even positive effects in some cases. In terms of behavior, students with foreign language anxiety may be resistant to speaking in front of their classmates (Ostman & Xethkis, 2021), and they may avoid using certain types of language (Teimori et al., 2019). Woodrow (2006) found that anxiety interfered with output in the classroom, and Pappamihel (2002) reported that students would choose not to respond or speak in the classroom. Yan & Horwitz (2008) found anxiety could even interfere with comprehension, with students reporting that they could not understand spoken instructions in the classroom but could understand the same instructions later when listening to a recording.

The evidence does suggest that foreign language anxiety can be reduced. Communicative activities and opportunities for conversation have been tied to reducing anxiety (Dykes, 2018; Ostman & Xethkis, 2021; Watson, 2020), and Ostman & Xethkis (2021) specifically noted that making friends in the classroom improved feelings of anxiety. Yan & Horwitz (2008) found that humor in the

classroom could be tied to lower anxiety. Shachter (2018) even observed that anxiety decreased over the course of a semester without any particular intervention.

Poor performance in a language class can also be tied to motivation. Anxiety can have negative effects on motivation (Yan & Horwitz, 2008), but language learning motivation is also often tied to the learner's thoughts about their ideal L2 self (Aubrey, 2014; Hughes et al., 2020). Many students in Japan have few opportunities to use English, thus limiting the development of their ideal L2 self (Takahashi, 2013). Hughes et al. (2020) explained that many second language learners are motivated by a desire to integrate with the communities of speakers in their new language but that in an EFL context, this motivation may not be present. However, teachers can address this potential lack of motivation in the classroom. Cowie and Sakui (2012) found that teachers believed that their actions in the classroom could improve short-term motivation, although they were skeptical of long-term improvements. Visgatis & Tada (2020) found that intervention and assistance from teachers lead to improved student motivation. Watson (2020) found that genuine interest and praise from teachers also had a positive impact on student motivation. Takahashi (2013) found that many students do have goals but are more limited by their opportunities, which could allow teacher intervention to support students in their achievement of those goals.

Discussion

The class that is targeted in this journal was in the level 2 proficiency band, the second highest of the four levels at the university. Teachers are told they can assume the students would have had a TOEIC score between 480 and 680. Previous experience with students of this level was mostly positive, with feedback often focused on meta skills rather than heavily focused on target language or participation. I began writing a journal about this class after the fifth lesson, and in that journal, I wrote that the class seemed quiet and did not participate strongly in the online classes. I was hopeful that the switch to face-to-face classes could be motivating, given that the students had not chosen online lessons, but rather were forced into it by the pandemic. With the quick switch to in-person classes, many classes were not comfortable in the first lesson on campus, but the continued struggles of this class in the fifth lesson made me decide to keep a journal.

Lesson Five: First Face-to-Face Presentations

Students had presented to the class once during their online classes. They each prepared and gave a short self-introduction presentation in the second lesson. They prepared for their first face-to-face presentation in the fourth lesson and gave the presentations in the fifth. These presentations were clearly difficult for the students, though at the time it was not immediately clear to me as to the reason for their struggles. Many students were extremely quiet while giving their presentations to the point that it was difficult to hear many of the presenters from the back of the room, even though the rest of the class was silent as listeners. Most students also primarily looked at their notes, rather than looking at their classmates while speaking. I wrote that it seemed like they did not want to be giving these presentations. Many presenters also failed to reach the required two-minute speaking time. The content of the presentations and the relative fluency with which the students spoke suggested that their language ability was enough to succeed, but for some reason, they struggled to perform well. Most of my experience with other classes at this level had been positive, with one or two students perhaps needing support due to shyness or anxiety, but nearly everyone in this class

struggled with their presentations, and I decided to start keeping a teaching journal. At the time, I could tell there was a problem, but I was unsure what was causing this behavior.

Lessons Six Through Nine: Lead Up to the Next Presentation

After seeing the students struggle with presenting in front of the class, I tried to make the classroom atmosphere more comfortable. I hoped that if they enjoyed being in class more and felt more relaxed, they would be able to participate more and speak more confidently. I believed that the abrupt switch from online classes to face-to-face could have been causing stress and discomfort for students and so I tried to make the atmosphere in class more relaxed. My journals during this period frequently describe the students as seeming to be shy in class but note that they behave differently when they are trying to work in English versus when they speak together in Japanese. This behavior was not limited to presentations but was observed with any activity where they had to speak English.

In the sixth lesson, students were quiet and even getting verbal replies to confirm understanding was difficult. When asked to speak in English with a partner in a warm-up, most groups only stayed in English for a short time before switching to Japanese. I tried to make the atmosphere positive and supportive. I gave praise for answering questions and gave away the answer to a few questions before asking the students to answer. I hoped to reduce what I perceived as a fear of being wrong. This did seem to lead to students being willing to participate, but their energy remained low. At the end of the lesson, students were given ten minutes to discuss the possible topics for their next presentation and choose what they wanted to present about. In my other classes, most students were able to choose a topic in this time limit. However, none of the students in this class replied that they had chosen. It is possible that they had chosen a topic but were unwilling to reply, but this made me question whether the students were shy or extremely unmotivated. Their refusal to participate did remind me of lower proficiency classes with low motivation and no desire to learn English.

In the seventh lesson, I decided to focus on speaking volume, hoping that since the students did generally follow instructions that they might attempt to speak louder when the expectation was explicitly stated. This did temporarily have a positive effect, with activities going better than in previous lessons, but many students quickly returned to speaking quietly. I noticed that when we finished our activities and students began working on their presentations and were allowed to use Japanese to speak to their classmates, their energy and speaking volume increased dramatically. The fact that they seemed to work well in Japanese but shut down when English was required suggested to me that the problems likely were related to English use and comfort with the language.

The eighth lesson was the last lesson to prepare before the next in-class presentations. As usual, students were shy and asking questions to the class yielded no responses. In this lesson, I met with each student individually to discuss their script and give advice and feedback. In these one-on-one discussions, the students seemed to match my expectations about their proficiency. They seemed to understand the feedback and could answer questions easily. During these meetings, students were asked to practice their presentations and to speak with a medium volume, but participation and energy was poor. At the time, I was confused how a class that seemed to be proficient in English seemed unable to use English with confidence. However, in my journal, I did write that it was clear to me that the students were shy about using English. I would mark this as the point that I was clear they were fighting anxiety, even if I did not use those words in my journal.

Lesson Nine: Second In-Class Presentations

The next presentations took place in the ninth lesson, and students were given time to practice with partners before presenting in the front of the class. My journal for this lesson notes that, while students did practice, they were still very quiet and did not seem interested in their practice. In fact, when I turned the projector on to begin preparing for presentations, the entire class stopped speaking and practicing despite having time left. Fortunately, their presentations were somewhat improved from the last time they presented to the class. In the fifth lesson, I had noted that several students were nearly inaudible, whereas this time, none of the students were nearly that quiet. In my journal, I wrote that students still seemed nervous and did not look comfortable in their presentations but that they did seem to take the advice on speaking volume. I was hopeful that if I continued to give specific advice, they could continue to improve for their final presentations.

Lessons Ten Through Twelve: Preparing for the Final Presentation

After the improvement in the students' presentations, I decided to continue focusing on keeping the classroom positive and on giving specific, actionable advice to help students improve. I did not yet know how to improve their participation in activities, but I was hopeful that if I could make them feel more comfortable at least I could make their final presentations a success.

In the tenth lesson, I used a vocal warm-up activity with all of my classes to help emphasize speaking volume and gave instructions at each step to help students more easily speak at louder volumes. This activity was well received in other classes, and the humor involved in making silly noises in a warm-up seemed to help students relax. I was nervous about using the activity with this class as I was not sure that they would be willing to participate, but they did go along with the activity and even followed the feedback about increasing their speaking volume between rounds. I tried to build rapport with the class by using a little Japanese to acknowledge that it could be embarrassing, and several students laughed in response. It is not possible to be sure whether the warm-up had a positive effect or if the students were just finally becoming more comfortable in class on their own, but their speaking volume during group activities was improved. I noted that humor did seem to have a positive effect on their mood and shyness. However, in an activity designed to focus on eye contact, the students were unwilling to correct mistakes made by their classmates. In this activity, students were asked to read a passage aloud from the book but were instructed to only speak while looking at their classmates and to stop their partner if they spoke while looking at the textbook. In other classes, the listeners were engaged and enthusiastic about catching their classmates' mistakes, but in this class, the listeners never stopped the speaker. Even in egregious examples, where the speaker was clearly reading from the book without eye contact, the listeners would not say anything.

While preparing for the eleventh lesson, I noticed that the low energy and perceived shyness of this class was affecting my feelings going into the class. I wrote in my journal that I felt like I just did not want to work with them. I felt like I did not want to do the activities that I thought they would not enjoy even though they seemed so successful with other students. I hoped that I could keep my own feelings controlled so that I could help the students improve to the best of my abilities. In the lesson, they did show some improvement from when I began keeping the journal. Students did not seem to particularly enjoy activities, but they did participate willingly and their energy in class did seem higher than previously. I wrote down that some students seemed to either not listen to or not understand instructions, as several students ignored the instruction to leave their books on the table

for a practice activity. However, it is not clear that this was anything more than a small group of students not listening carefully. In this lesson, students received some feedback on the outlines they submitted for their final presentation and the effort put into those outlines clearly varied considerably. Several students put together a clear, detailed plan that showed thought and hard work, while others failed to meet the minimum requirements of the assignment. At the end of the lesson, I emphasized the benefit of really knowing your content in a presentation and shared some stories that caused some positive reactions from the class, and I wrote in my journal that I hoped it would have an impact on their preparation.

The twelfth lesson was the last lesson before we began final presentations. Most of the time was spent practicing with small groups and meeting with me one-on-one for feedback on their scripts. My notes for this lesson were brief, as so much of my time was spent one-on-one with the students. I did write that, while students were willing to practice their scripts with their groups, they were very quiet while doing so. I wrote that I was unsure if this was a sign of a problem or just normal behavior since multiple groups would have presenters speaking at the same time. I also noted that the overall willingness of students to answer questions and speak up in class had improved since our first face-to-face lessons, and in my journal, I wrote that I hoped the final presentations would continue the improvement I saw between the first and second in-person presentations.

Lessons Thirteen and Fourteen: Final Presentations

The final presentations began in the thirteenth lesson, after the university's two-week winter vacation. I was pleased with the warm-up, and students did seem to have energy when working together as a class. They were a little quiet while practicing with a partner, but it seemed that every student was trying to practice. However, the actual presentations were not as successful as I had hoped. Nearly all of the presenters failed to speak for the minimum required time, and most speakers stared at their notes for the majority of their presentation, leading to poor eye contact. I also wrote in my journal that no student spoke loudly enough for me to have considered it a good performance, and a few were nearly inaudible from my position at the back of the classroom. I thought it was possible that students were less energetic since they had just finished their winter holidays, but it did not seem like the students were motivated or prepared.

We finished our final presentations in the fourteenth lesson, and there was no improvement from the previous week. Students were very quiet during the warm-up activity and practice and their presentations were poor. Again, most speakers failed to reach the minimum required speaking time, and nearly every speaker avoided eye contact, read from their notes, and spoke quietly. Two students even had to be stopped and told that they were so quiet that I could not hear them and one of those failed to raise their voice even after being stopped. I wrote that it was difficult to judge whether the students were shy, afraid, or just did not care about the class. I was disappointed that the improvements I saw during the semester had entirely disappeared for the final presentations.

Reflection

Looking back on the class, reflecting on the journal, and considering the literature that I read to help understand this class, I am confident that foreign language anxiety was a major contributor to the difficulty the students had performing in class. Initially, I had some thoughts about public speaking anxiety, but the way that students struggled in groups and in activities that did not involve

presenting showed that it is not really possible to explain everything with just a fear of presenting. In particular, what stands out to me is the dichotomy of their behavior when using English and their behavior when they were allowed to speak Japanese. I would expect that any class would feel more comfortable in their native language, but this class went between nearly silent and impossible to work with to relaxed and energetic with the switch. The avoidance of participation and refusal to use the target language was as detailed by Pappamihiel (2002). There were certainly times in the class where I considered motivation to be the culprit, but there were students who seemed to work hard outside of class only to shut down when they needed to use English in class, suggesting that motivation could not be the sole cause of their problems. It is possible that the students' anxiety also reduced their motivation in class, as Yan & Horwitz (2008) noted.

My previous experience with students at this proficiency level led me to expect them to function reasonably well in English, and while I would not have been surprised if some students were anxious to start the semester, I was caught off-guard when the entire class struggled to participate. I had expected that higher-proficiency students would be less anxious and better able to perform but, as Llinás & Garau (2009) stated, there are cases where higher proficiency students are more anxious. Learning this will better prepare me to more quickly identify cases when high-proficiency students struggle from anxiety issues.

I have also learned that it is critical to address anxiety issues early and consistently. Shachter (2018) saw anxiety decrease over a semester without any particular intervention, but as I observed in this class, that cannot be counted on to be adequate. As Horwitz (2002) noted, teacher intervention and support can help with anxiety, and there are a variety of options for helping to address anxiety, including using humor (Yan & Horwitz, 2008), using communicative activities (Dykes, 2018), and fostering friendship between students (Ostman & Xethkis, 2021). In this class I did see some impact from activities and teacher feedback, but I believe that designing the course to identify and support anxious students from the start would be more effective at improving their comfort and performance.

Conclusion

Reflecting on this semester and this one problematic class has helped me understand how classes may differ from a teacher's expectations and face challenges that the teacher did not expect before the class began. I also have a better understanding of how foreign language anxiety can impact performance in a language classroom, and I believe I can identify it more readily in the future.

From this experience, I have several changes that I plan to make to my teaching going forward. First, I will separate my understanding of students' proficiency level from my expectations about their comfort in class. By avoiding this assumption, I should be able to do a better job quickly assessing a classes' needs. Second, I plan to adjust the syllabus design to give students more chances to work in small groups and use English together. I believe that while students often do appreciate preparation time for their presentations, reducing interaction time and chances to speak and be friendly with classmates is not a trade-off I want to make. Finally, I want to investigate how I might be able to support students in dealing with anxiety through teacher modeling and interaction. Specifically targeted feedback did seem to improve student performance temporarily, and humor also temporarily seemed to increase participation. I believe that making this a focus for future journals and research could continue to improve my ability to help students who struggle in the language classroom.

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