

Exploring the Effects of English Discussion Courses on Japanese EFL College Students' Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

MATSUDA, Maki

Abstract

This study investigated the impact of English Discussion courses on speaking anxiety among first-year Japanese university students. While Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) has been widely acknowledged as a major barrier to language acquisition, especially in speaking, its long-term reduction through structured discussion-based instruction remains underexplored in the Japanese EFL context. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study measured students' anxiety levels before and after a 14-week semester using the Short-Form Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (S-FLCAS) and analyzed responses to four open-ended questions. Results from 32 participants revealed a significant decrease in anxiety scores over time, with 90% of students reporting reduced anxiety. Qualitative data indicated that repeated small-group discussions, teacher scaffolding, and pre-thinking tasks were effective in creating a psychologically safe environment. However, students continued to feel anxious during high-stakes or unfamiliar speaking tasks. The findings suggest that while structured discussion activities can alleviate speaking anxiety, continuous affective support and learner-centered strategies are essential for long-term impact. Implications for EFL instruction include incorporating peer familiarity, vocabulary preparation, and emotionally supportive practices into curriculum design.

Keywords: *Foreign language anxiety, English discussion courses in academic context, English as a second language*

Introduction

“Do you want to use a foreign language at work? Why or why not?” This is the first warm-up question used to start the discussion class in Week 10 at Rikkyo University. Unfortunately, quite a few students in my class respond by saying, *“I don't want to use a foreign language at work because I'm not good at speaking English.”* But is that truly the case? The English Discussion Class, a required course for first-year students at Rikkyo University, is designed to improve students' academic discussion skills. However, after observing the class

over the past two years, I have noticed that some students continue to struggle with English-speaking anxiety, even though they participate in discussion classes weekly.

Research on Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) highlights its significant impact on learners' speaking performance and overall language acquisition. Horwitz et al. (1986) defined FLA as a "distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." This concept has been extensively studied in various contexts, with findings indicating that speaking is often the most anxiety-provoking skill for language learners (Young, 1991).

In the Japanese EFL context where English is learned as a second language, several studies have shown that cultural and educational factors contribute to high levels of speaking anxiety. Williams and Andrade (2008) found that Japanese students often fear making mistakes or being judged negatively by their peers, which inhibits their willingness to participate in discussions. Similarly, Cutrone (2009) argued that Japanese learners' anxiety derives from cultural tendencies toward modesty and risk hedge, which can discourage them from speaking in front of others.

English Discussion Classes at Rikkyo University are designed to improve students' confidence and fluency in spoken English. However, as observed in my classes, speaking anxiety may persist despite regular practice. Young (1991) suggested that even interactive teaching methods might fail to address deeper psychological barriers unless specific strategies are employed to reduce anxiety, such as creating a supportive environment and focusing on communication rather than correctness.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) further emphasized that alleviating anxiety leads to better speaking performance and greater willingness to communicate. Collaborative activities, such as small-group discussions, have also been shown to lower anxiety levels and improve oral proficiency (Bozkurt & Aydin, 2023). However, whether these benefits extend to all learners, particularly those in high-anxiety environments like Japan, remains uncertain.

While significant research exists on foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991), the specific impact of discussion-based courses on Japanese EFL learners' speaking anxiety is underexplored. Studies by Williams and Andrade (2008) and Cutrone (2009) highlight the cultural and educational barriers faced by Japanese students, but there is limited understanding of how structured discussion activities influence learners' anxiety over time.

Moreover, while studies like those of Young (1991) and Bozkurt & Aydin (2023) have shown that collaborative learning environments reduce anxiety and enhance speaking proficiency, their focus has largely been on general learner populations. Few studies have examined the long-term effects of discussion courses on anxiety or investigated learners' perceptions of these changes throughout an academic semester.

Research Questions

In light of these gaps mentioned above, this study aims to address these gaps by exploring the following research questions:

1. What are the effects of discussion courses on Japanese college students' speaking anxiety?
2. How do Japanese college students perceive the impact of discussion courses on reducing their initial speaking anxiety over the course of a semester?

Methodology and Procedures

This study employed a case study approach, with data collected from 32 students enrolled in the first semester of three mandatory English Discussion courses for first-year students during the academic year 2025. The participants, consisting of both male and female students aged 18 to 21, had an average English proficiency level of A2–B1 as determined by their TOEIC® scores (ranging from 380–480, Level 3 and 4), based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Each class lasted 100 minutes and was conducted once a week from April to July during the 14-week spring semester (See Table 1).

To evaluate changes in students' Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) over the course of the semester, this study utilized a pre- and post-survey approach with the Short-Form Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (S-FLCAS). The S-FLCAS, a validated instrument derived from the original Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz et al. (1986), focuses on assessing key dimensions of FLA relevant to speaking anxiety. The original FLCAS measures FLA across three subcomponents—fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety—using 33 items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” While comprehensive, the FLCAS includes items that may not directly align with the context of English Discussion courses, particularly for evaluating foreign language speaking anxiety which is the focus of this study.

The S-FLCAS, as described by Botes et al. (2022) in *Validating the Short-Form Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale*, offers a more concise and targeted approach, retaining the psychometric rigor of the original while demonstrating high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$) and strong reliability across diverse contexts. In this study, the S-FLCAS was administered to students at two time points: at the beginning of the semester (April) to establish baseline levels of speaking anxiety and at the end of the semester (July) to evaluate changes following their participation in the English Discussion courses. By employing this pre- and post-survey design, the study was intended to effectively measure both initial levels of speaking anxiety and any reductions or shifts in anxiety over the course of the semester. To facilitate the students' easiness to complete the survey, both pre- and post- surveys employed the translation

of relevant items taken from Yashima et al. (2009). The below shows the original version of questions on the S-FLCAS.

Short-form Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (S-FLCAS)

Please indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements.

Use the scale below:

1= Strongly Disagree 2= Disagree 3= Neutral 4= Agree 5= Strongly Agree

- 1) Even if I am well prepared for FL class, I feel anxious about it
- 2) I always feel that the other students speak the FL better than I do
- 3) I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in FL class
- 4) I don't worry about making mistakes in FL class (reverse coded)
- 5) I feel confident when I speak in FL class (reverse coded)
- 6) I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my FL class
- 7) I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in FL class
- 8) It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my FL class.

Open-ended Questions:

In addition to the quantitative pre- and post-tests, qualitative data was collected from a post-class survey to gauge how the students perceived the impact of discussion courses on reducing their initial speaking anxiety.

- 1) How have your feelings of anxiety changed throughout the semester?
- 2) What specific activities or aspects of the discussion courses helped you feel less anxious about speaking English?
- 3) Were there any moments or experiences during the course that made you feel especially nervous about speaking English?
- 4) What suggestions do you have for improving the course to help students overcome their speaking anxiety more effectively?

Note. Questions developed by the author

Table 1

Course Schedule and Target Discussion/Communication Skills

Week	Content	Discussion/Communication Skills
1	Course Introduction	Introduction of all Communication Skills
2	The Importance of Communication	Opinions
3	Entering University	Supporting Opinions
4	Life at University	Follow-up Questions
5	Becoming Independent	Review & Comprehension Discussion Test 1 (Sharing & Supporting Opinions)
6	Living Abroad	Connecting Ideas
7	The Globalization of Japanese Culture	Joining a Discussion
8	Japanese and Foreign Customs	Changing Topics
9	Learning a Foreign Language	Review & Paraphrasing Discussion Test 2 (Organizing a Discussion)
10	Entering the Workforce	Different Viewpoints
11	Social Media	Balancing Opinions
12	Public Behavior	Sources of Information
13	Social Issues	Review & Clarification Discussion Test 3 (Challenging & Evaluating Ideas)
14	Review of all topics	Review of all skills

Results & Discussion

Students' anxiety levels

To answer the first research question, which is “What are the effects of discussion courses on Japanese college students’ speaking anxiety?,” the pre- and post- survey results of 60 students were compared. As shown in Table 2, there was a significant decrease in levels of anxiety at the end of the semester by 0.44 in mean score, from 3.46 to 3.02, compared to the beginning of the semester. Furthermore, almost all students (30 out of 32) showed a decrease in their anxiety scores. These results clearly suggest the effectiveness of discussion classes to alleviate the students’ speaking anxiety.

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics of Short-Form Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (S-FLCAS)*

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Pre- FLCAS	3.46	1.12	1.00	5.00
Post- FLCAS	3.02	0.58	1.00	1.00

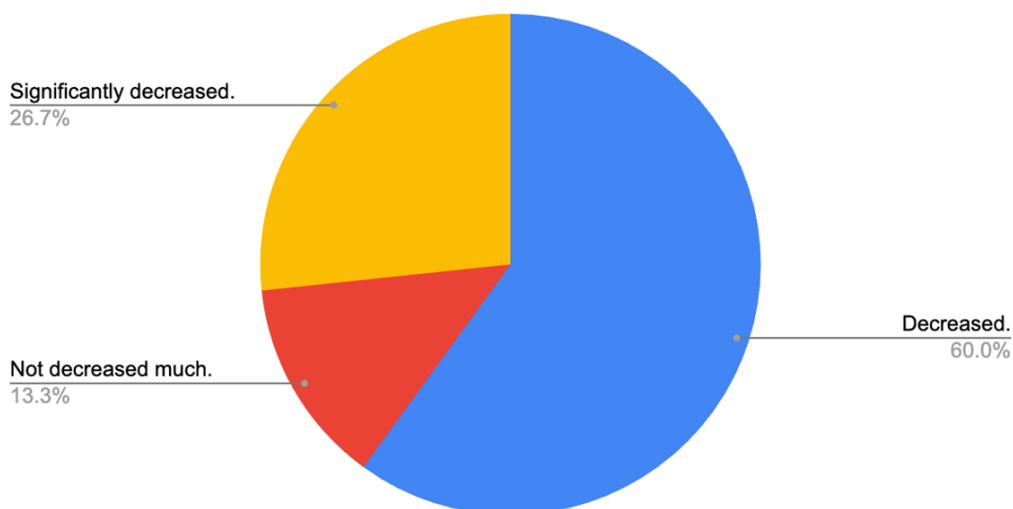
Note. Pre- FLCAS N = 32, Post- FLCAS N = 30

Qualitative data analysis from post-class survey

To address the second research question, “How do Japanese college students perceive the impact of discussion classes on reducing their initial speaking anxiety over the course of a semester?,” qualitative data from the post-class survey were analyzed. The four open-ended questions were categorized into the following themes, in accordance with the question order: “Change in Anxiety,” “Speaking Activities,” “Nervous Feelings,” and “Suggestions.” Since two students were absent from the Week 14 lesson, responses were collected from a total of 30 students.

The following pie chart Figure 1 illustrates responses from the first question “How have your feelings of anxiety changed throughout the semester?” based on the theme “Change in anxiety.”

Approximately 27% of the students reported that their anxiety has decreased significantly and as many as 60% of them said it has decreased. In contrast, only 13% of the students indicated the anxiety had not changed much. These results also suggested discussion classes played a significant role in reducing the students’ speaking anxiety.

Figure 1*How Have Your Feelings of Anxiety Changed Throughout the Semester?*

The qualitative data collected from these questions added a rich layer of nuance to the

quantitative findings, which indicated that discussion classes contributed to alleviating students' speaking anxiety.

Table 3 presents a sample of analysis including theme, descriptions, and examples.

Table 3

Excerpt of the Comments From the Participants

Theme	Description & Example from students' comments
Speaking activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Forming small groups and talking about the same topic repeatedly was helpful. 2) The teacher rephrased my awkward answer into simpler English which, eased my nervous feelings. 3) Repeating my classmate's opinions when we wrap up our discussion was useful for my speaking skills. 4) The pre-thinking activities before the actual discussions helped me generate ideas more smoothly. 5) The teacher ensured equal participation opportunity which made it easier for me to speak up. 6) Repeatedly using the same discussion skill phrases allowed me to realize that my English skills were improving. 7) I felt more relaxed because there was only one teacher and I didn't feel constantly monitored.
Nervous Feeling	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) I felt especially nervous during the discussion tests because I couldn't come up ideas smoothly. 2) I felt anxious when asked by "What do you think of my idea?" because I somewhat couldn't understand what my classmates were saying. 3) I felt more nervous when the topic was difficult or something I had never thought of, I felt more nervous. 4) When I hadn't read the textbook but was asked to give my opinion, I felt very anxious. 5) Performing discussions in front of the whole class made me even more nervous.
Suggestions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) If I had more time to memorize the phrases, the class would be even more effective. 2) If we had more activities to get to know our classmates better, our anxiety would decrease even more. 3) If we could learn more vocabulary related to the discussion topics, I could participate more actively. 4) The smaller the group size, the easier it is for me to speak. 5) If the topics were more familiar, we could talk more smoothly.

Overall, the data suggest that structured repetition, teacher scaffolding, and psychological safety are key elements in reducing learners' speaking anxiety and enhancing classroom participation. At the same time, the persistence of nervousness in more demanding or unpredictable speaking tasks points to the importance of continued affective support. Learner feedback also emphasizes the value of peer familiarity and topic relevance, indicating a strong need to balance communicative challenge with emotional readiness in discussion-based language instruction.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study highlights the transformative potential of structured English Discussion courses in reducing Japanese college students' speaking anxiety—a commonly cited barrier to active language use in the EFL classroom. Quantitative data collected through the Short-Form Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (S-FLCAS) revealed a statistically significant decrease in anxiety levels over the course of a 14-week semester. These findings indicate that regular, structured speaking practice within a supportive framework can have a measurable impact on learners' emotional comfort with using English.

Complementing these quantitative results, qualitative feedback from students shed light on the specific instructional elements that contributed most to their reduced anxiety and increased confidence. Key among these were small-group repetition of discussion tasks, teacher scaffolding such as rephrasing and modeling, and pre-thinking activities that supported idea generation. Together, these strategies fostered a psychologically safe classroom environment where students felt encouraged to take linguistic risks and participate more fully. The findings confirm that when learners are supported both linguistically and emotionally, they become more engaged and confident communicators in English.

However, the data also reveal that speaking anxiety does not disappear entirely, even in well-structured, supportive environments. Students reported continued nervousness in high-stakes moments, such as formal discussion tests or when encountering unfamiliar topics or vocabulary. Emotional discomfort also increased when students lacked adequate preparation or felt unsure of their classmates' reactions. These findings highlight the limits of instructional design alone and point to the enduring influence of cultural, interpersonal, and psychological factors—such as fear of negative evaluation and low peer familiarity—that may inhibit learner participation.

Therefore, the importance of cultivating a culturally responsive and emotionally attuned classroom culture cannot be overstated. Discussion-based instruction, while effective, must be embedded within a broader pedagogical framework that recognizes and responds to students' affective needs.

To further enhance the effectiveness of such instruction, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Increase Familiarity Through Icebreakers and Community-Building Tasks

Starting the semester with informal, low-pressure activities that encourage interpersonal connection can help students feel more at ease with their classmates, lowering the perceived social risk of speaking in English.

2. Incorporate Scaffolded Vocabulary Support

Pre-teaching key vocabulary and expressions relevant to discussion topics can reduce cognitive load and increase students' willingness to contribute during discussions.

3. Adjust Group Size for Comfort and Participation

Organizing students into smaller, more intimate groups increases opportunities for equal participation and decreases the likelihood of performance anxiety associated with larger audiences.

4. Offer Repetition with Variation

Using repeated discussion structures across different topics allows students to develop fluency and confidence through familiarity while gradually increasing linguistic challenge.

5. Normalize Mistakes and Encourage Risk-Taking

Teachers play a critical role in modeling a nonjudgmental attitude toward errors. Framing mistakes as learning opportunities helps shift students' mindset from fear of failure to growth and experimentation.

In conclusion, structured discussion courses present a promising and practical avenue for reducing foreign language speaking anxiety and enhancing communicative competence among Japanese EFL learners. Yet, the full realization of these benefits depends not only on instructional techniques but also on the creation of a classroom culture that values emotional safety, peer connection, and positive reinforcement. Future research may further explore the long-term impact of such interventions, as well as the differential effects of instructional strategies across diverse learner backgrounds, proficiency levels, and personality traits. With thoughtful implementation and ongoing adaptation, discussion-based instruction can serve as both a linguistic and emotional bridge to more confident English communication.

References

- Botes, E., Van der Westhuizen, L., Dewaele, J. M., MacIntyre, P., & Greiff, S. (2022). Validating the short-form foreign language classroom anxiety scale. *Applied Linguistics*, 43(5), 1006–1033. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amac018>
- Bozkurt, B. N., & Aydın, S. (2023). The impact of collaborative learning on speaking anxiety among foreign language learners in online and face-to-face environments. *International Journal of Virtual and Personal Learning Environments*, 13(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.4018/IJVPLE.316973>
- Cutrone, P. (2009). Overcoming Japanese EFL learners' fear of speaking. *Language Studies Working Papers*, 1, 55–63.
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. A. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125–132.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1991). Methods and results in the study of anxiety and language learning: A review of the literature. *Language Learning*, 41(1), 85–117.
- Williams, K. E., & Andrade, M. R. (2008). Foreign language learning anxiety in Japanese EFL

university classes: Causes, coping, and locus of control. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 5(2), 181–191.

Yashima, T., Noels, K., Shizuka, T., Takeuchi, O., Yamane, S., & Yoshizawa, K. (2009). The interplay of classroom anxiety, intrinsic motivation, and gender in the Japanese EFL context. *Journal of Foreign Language Education and Research*, 17, 41–64. <https://www.psych.ualberta.ca/~knoels/personal/Kim's%20publications/YashimaNoels2009.pdf>

Young, D. J. (1991). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: What does the language anxiety research suggest? *The Modern Language Journal*, 75(4), 426–437. <https://doi.org/10.2307/329492>