

[Article]

# Effects of EFL Learners' Pronunciation Belief and Awareness on Their English Speaking Anxiety: The Case of Low-intermediate Japanese College Students\*

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## 1. Introduction

It is a common claim that Japanese students are very reluctant to join any communicative activity in their English classes (Anderson, 1993; Cutrone, 2009). Their unwillingness to speak in English and their inherently low speaking ability appears in the nationwide survey results for the third-year high school students: 13.3% of the students either did not respond to the interviewer or obtained the score zero. The survey also showed that 58.3% of the students answered that they do not like English, and that those who expressed their dislike for English accounted for the vast majority (87.2%) of those who were rated as being lower A1 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), in terms of speaking ability (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2014). According to the same survey, the reading and listening abilities of Japanese students were evaluated higher than their speaking competence. The results for reading and speaking

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showed that more students were rated as being A2 and above. What, then, prevents Japanese students from speaking in English when they are equipped with the grammatical and lexical knowledge that should enable them to speak better than they do now?

One of the major factors that prevents Japanese students from speaking in English seems to be anxiety (Yamashiro & McLaughlin, 2001). In fact, a number of research in the past two decades indicates that anxiety has a debilitating effect on the foreign or second language learning process (E. K. Horwitz, M. Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Kitano, 2001). Anxiety is seen as a debilitating factor which prevents students from speaking in a foreign language, because it occupies cognitive capacity that would otherwise be devoted to speech (Woodrow, 2006). It is common for English teachers in Japan to see students anxiously sitting still in class, looking down and hoping they will not be asked to speak. Would they be willing to speak more if they were not worried about speaking in English in the classroom? Our objective was to investigate the predictive factors of the anxiety that prevents Japanese students from speaking in their English classes.

### **1.1. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and Its Components**

Since Horwitz and her colleagues (Horwitz et al., 1986) developed an instrument to measure foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), a number of scholars have conducted studies to understand the mechanism and components of anxiety in second language learning (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Their findings indicated that one of the biggest components of foreign or second language classroom anxiety was primarily speaking anxiety, which is comprised of 1) an individual's fear of negative evaluation by others and 2) low self-perceived speaking ability (Cheng, Horwitz & Schallert, 1999; Kitano, 2001; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Young, 1991). Kitano (2001) and Young (1991) found a correlation between second or foreign language speaking anxiety and one's fear of negative evaluation; that is, they found that an individual student's speaking anxiety was higher as his or her fear of negative evaluation was stronger. Meanwhile, Kitano (2001), MacIntyre et

al. (1997) and Liu and Jackson (2008) reported a negative correlation between the level of one's speaking anxiety and self-perceived levels of speaking ability, indicating that the higher a speaker's anxiety was, the lower that speaker's perception of his or her speaking ability was. A similar correlation was also found in Japan. Kawauchi (2016) reported a high negative correlation between language anxiety and self-perceived English proficiency among 110 Japanese male college students. Their anxiety became particularly high when they were asked to speak in English alone without any preparation in class.

Szyska (2011) indicated that a common feature that underlies these two components of speaking anxiety is pronunciation: "the most integral components of oral performance" (p.283). In her study that investigated 48 English teacher trainee college students, Szyska found a negative correlation between their level of language anxiety and their self-perceived English pronunciation competence, indicating that one's anxiety about pronunciation competence increases speaking anxiety. In a similar vein, Tang, Zhang, Li, and Zhao (2013) claimed that pronunciation plays the most important role in creating speaking anxiety, especially among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In their research, they found that 237 Chinese learners of English tended to feel worried that people judged their English speaking proficiency by the level of their pronunciation. As far as EFL students are concerned, pronunciation is the most observable and salient characteristic of non-native speakers of English, (Cenoz & Lecumberri, 1999) and thus, a primary issue when a language learner concerns when they speak in foreign language (Liu, 2006).

In the sense that pronunciation is seen as the underlying factor increasing one's speaking anxiety, it seems plausible that one's low self-perceived pronunciation competence is the key factor in causing speaking anxiety in the foreign language classroom. What, then, is it that makes EFL students evaluate their own pronunciation as poor? What kind of criteria do they use when they assess their own foreign language pronunciation?

To our knowledge, there are very few researchers who have focused on how and on what grounds EFL learners assess their own pronunciation. Cenoz and Lecumberri (1999) suggested that awareness and beliefs about

pronunciation are the key factors that learners acknowledge when they speak in a foreign language, and these notions have a significant impact on one's oral performance and acquisition of a foreign or second language. Similarly, Liu (2006) found that undergraduate learners of English in China experienced more anxiety when they were giving oral presentations in class, compared to other classroom activities, especially when students had high awareness of the level of their speech production. With respect to the above findings, it can be hypothesised that learners with high pronunciation awareness and strong belief in the importance of speaking with natively-like-English pronunciation are likely to have high speaking anxiety. Language learners who have such high awareness and beliefs about pronunciation tend to try to speak like native speakers, wanting to acquire as close to "perfect" pronunciation as they possibly can. Such learners are likely to assess their self-perceived pronunciation as low, due to an unrealistically high target (Tang et al., 2013; Woodrow, 2006). In fact, a link between language anxiety and perfectionism is reported by Gregersen and E. K. Horwitz (2002). They suggested that language learners "who are overly concerned with the appearance of their communication attempts tend to set excessively high standards for performance accompanied by overly critical self-evaluations" (p. 563). In other words, learners who have a high awareness of pronunciation are likely to have the belief that they should speak with as good a pronunciation as native speakers do. However, there is not enough research about the relationship between pronunciation belief or awareness, and learners' foreign language speaking anxiety. An investigation of this relationship may provide important insights into the constructs of foreign language speaking anxiety. Indeed, in light of the urgent need of developing students' oral skills so that they can be globally competitive when they graduate, foreign language speaking anxiety should be addressed now more than ever. Prior to engaging in English communication at the workplace, students need to attain a certain level of English proficiency that enables them fully express themselves in tough business negotiations. Research into factors that are affecting the successful acquisition of English speaking skills seems highly beneficial to university students in Japan.

The purpose of the present study is to fill in the existing gap by investigating whether, and in what way, one's pronunciation belief and awareness affect one's foreign language speaking anxiety.

The hypothesis adopted for the purpose of our research is the following: EFL students who have high pronunciation awareness and belief in speaking with a nativelike pronunciation are likely to have high language anxiety when they attempt to communicate. Based on this hypothesis, the following questions guided our research.

## **1.2. Research Questions**

The present research focused on Japanese college students' pronunciation belief and awareness during English class activities:

1. To what extent does the pronunciation awareness of Japanese EFL learners predict their foreign language speaking anxiety?
2. To what extent does the pronunciation belief of Japanese EFL learners predict their foreign language speaking anxiety?

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of 194 Japanese registered at a university in the capital region in Japan. Out of 194 answers obtained, 158 (male = 140, female = 18) eligible answers were investigated in this study. All of the participants' first language is Japanese, in addition, none of them has ever been out of Japan for more than three months. All of them were participating in English compulsory classes twice a week (90 minutes per class), and had about the same amount of assignments every week, which typically required them to spend about an hour per assignment for each class. The number of male students was considerably higher than that of female students, as the study took place in the department of science-related subjects, where male students are commonly predominant in Japan. There were 72 first-year, 85 second-year and

one third-year students. Their TOEIC scores were in the range of 300 to 400. Judging from their TOEIC scores and their performance in the 15-week English course they took in the spring semester of 2016, their English proficiency levels were lower-intermediate, which could be converted primarily to level A1 in the CEFR.

## **2.2. Instruments**

An 11-item multiple-choice survey (see Appendix A) was prepared for this study. Of the eleven items, eight items surveyed the speaking anxiety that students feel when they speak English in their English classes, three items asked about their beliefs and awareness regarding English pronunciation. There were also four background questionnaire items (see Appendix B). These eight measurement items were originally made and used by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) in a research that investigated Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) in 1746 students from around the world. The wording of these eight items was slightly adapted to suit our purpose, namely, investigating the speaking anxiety of Japanese learners of English, and translated into Japanese by the authors in order to enable low-proficiency students to thoroughly understand the contents. This modification and translation process involved discussion on content validity by English lecturers at a tertiary level institution and graduate students who major in English education and applied linguistics. The coefficient Cronbach's alpha of these eight items indicates the high internal reliability of the tool ( $\alpha = .86$ ) (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, p. 247). The other three items were created by the authors to measure the participants' awareness and belief in their pronunciation; that is, what kind of pronunciation they believe is good as well as the pronunciation they think they should try to adopt. One of the items (Pro1) was an open-ended question to ask what a participant considers to be "good" pronunciation. As the great majority of eligible answers suggested that participants thought good pronunciation was a "nativelike" one, we pursued the research on the understanding that their pronunciation belief and awareness are based on this conception. Additionally, four background questionnaire items asked for the following

information: 1) academic year, 2) gender, 3) first language, and 4) whether they have overseas experience exceeding three months. The responses were given on a 6-point likert scale where 1 indicated strong disagreement and 6 indicated strong agreement. Among the eight items regarding anxiety over speaking in English in the classroom, two items (Anx3 and Anx6) were reversed. In order to control for possible fatigue and order effects, questionnaires were counterbalanced and presented in two different order: Questionnaire1 and Questionnaire2. Half of the participants answered each form.

### **2.3. Procedures**

The students were asked to rate each item on the questionnaires at the end of class in the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> week of the spring semester in 2016. Including an explanation of how to fill in the forms, students were given enough time to finish the questionnaires. After the survey forms were collected, the data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS ver. 23).

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Preliminary Analysis**

The descriptive analysis showed that 137 participants' answers ranged from 4 ("slightly agree" = 4, "agree" = 5, "strongly agree" = 6) on the items that refer to the importance of speaking English with a "good" pronunciation (See "Pro1" in Appendix A). As the vast majority (86.7%) of the participants agreed with "Pro1," this study focused on analysing these 137 students, as their data highly likely reflects the attributes of the participants in this study. Since the FLCA scale used in this study was modified and translated in order to investigate the speaking anxiety of Japanese EFL undergraduate students, we calculated Cronbach's alpha to check the reliability of the eight items in terms of internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha computed on eight items was .76 while the figure became .80 by eliminating the eighth item ("Anx8\*" in Appendix A). As  $\alpha = .80$  is high enough to indicate high reliability of internal consistency, we used seven items ("Anx1" to "Anx7" in Appendix A) for the current study.

### **3.2. Assumptions for Multiple Regression Analysis**

For the purpose of understanding the properties of the foreign language speaking anxiety and the pronunciation belief and awareness of the participants, simultaneous multiple regression procedure was performed to examine their comparative associations. More specifically, this procedure was employed to identify the extent to which one's pronunciation belief and awareness can predict the foreign language speaking anxiety by setting "Pro2 (belief)" and "Pro3 (awareness)" (see Appendix A) as independent variables, and speaking anxiety as a dependent variable. After further statistical procedure, these 137 cases were screened through an SPSS program to detect outliers, which resulted in eliminating ten cases from the original samples. According to Porte (2002), 30 participants per independent variable are recommended in order to obtain reliable statistical results. 127 participants in this study therefore fulfill this requirement. The SPSS calculation and its output detected no violated assumptions for multiple regression analysis in the following five aspects: 1) multicollinearity, 2) non-linearity between independent and dependent variables, 3) homoscedasticity of the residuals, 4) normality of the residuals, and 5) independency of the residuals in the model.

### **3.3. Results of Multiple Regression**

Descriptive statistics of the sample data are displayed in Table 1, and the Spearman's rho correlation coefficients between pronunciation belief and awareness and foreign language speaking anxiety are displayed in Table 2. The results of the simultaneous multiple regression are shown in Table 3. According to Cohen's effect size, the values of these correlation coefficients are very small, and thus suggest that there is no significant correlation between these variables (Cohen, 1988).

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Questionnaire Scores

	M	SD	N
Pro2 (Belief)	4.39	1.285	127
Pro3 (Awareness)	4.36	1.067	127
*Anx1-7 (sum)	4.24	0.901	127

\*Anx = Anxiety over speaking in foreign language in the classroom

Table 2. Correlations between Pronunciation Belief / Awareness and \*Anxiety

		Pro2	Pro3	*Anx
		Belief	Awareness	Anxiety
Pro2	Belief			
Pro3	Awareness	.51		
*Anx	Anxiety over speaking in foreign language in the classroom	-.11	-.10	

\*Anx = Anxiety over speaking in foreign language in the classroom

Table 3. Results of Simultaneous Multiple Regression

	variable	B	SEB	$\beta$
Pro2	Belief	-0.06	0.07	-.08
Pro3	Awareness	-0.06	0.09	-.07

Note.  $R^2 = .00$

As can be seen in Table 3, the adjusted  $R^2$  suggested that only 0.1 % of the variance in speaking anxiety can be explained by pronunciation belief and awareness. The figure shows that anxiety over speaking in a foreign language in the classroom was not predicted by these two independent variables. The beta value of "Pro2" (belief) was -.08, and that of "Pro3" (awareness) was -.07; therefore, the values of each variable were also low, and no significant difference between these two values could be found (5% level). The findings suggest that neither of the variables, pronunciation belief nor awareness, seems to predict the extent to which Japanese learners of English feel anxiety when they speak in English in class.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The overall goal of this study was to seek the extent to which the belief in and awareness of one's pronunciation predict foreign language speaking anxiety in the EFL classroom. Our findings showed that although participants showed relatively high speaking anxiety ( $M = 4.24$ ), there was no significant correlation between one's pronunciation belief or awareness and their foreign language speaking anxiety. Multiple regression analysis also suggested that such pronunciation belief and awareness did not predict participants' anxiety over speaking in a foreign language. Thus, the result was not consistent with past findings that prominently indicate a correlation between one's speaking or pronunciation perception and speaking anxiety in foreign or second language speaking. Past studies have found that the level of self-perceived speaking or pronunciation competence was often the main factor in predicting the level of foreign language speaking anxiety. Assuming that one's such self-evaluation is based on self-consciousness regarding one's foreign language speech, higher pronunciation belief and awareness were expected to result in causing a higher level of speaking anxiety.

One possible reason behind the inconsistency between our research and some of the past findings could be attributed to the lack of participants' experience in English communication. Their exposure to English conversation has been mostly limited to exchanges of short English language chunks or sentences during classroom activities in secondary education (or tertiary education for second and third year students). Considering both the participants' low English proficiency and background (they have never been out of Japan for more than three months), it is assumed that the participants hardly experienced actual, spontaneous conversation in English where communication can break down, or speakers might receive negative evaluations by the interlocutors if their pronunciation is incomprehensible (Tang et al., 2013). In other words, the participants could not think of or imagine such a reality because they had never had a chance to try to speak in the pronunciation they believe to be good, and therefore suitable an actual English conversation. In addition, there is a pos-

sibility that the participants did not have a good understanding of or specific knowledge about, English pronunciation itself. It is widely acknowledged that pronunciation instruction has been largely ignored in secondary and a tertiary education in Japan until very recently (Ota, 2012). The participants might have had a vague idea that nativelike pronunciation was supposed to be “good” as the English listening materials used in the class served as their pronunciation models were mostly recorded by native speakers of English. However, their understanding of how pronunciation can affect the quality of communication may have been too obscure to answer the questionnaires we employed. This might explain the current outcome that even though the informants generally had quite strong pronunciation belief and high awareness of good pronunciation, and also were anxious about speaking in English (see Table 1), such elements were not connected within their conceptions of pronunciation. In this sense, little pronunciation instruction as well as the lack of experience in English conversation and the participants' inherently low English proficiency might have been the reason for the difference between some past research and current study.

Another possibility could be that there are other variables that affect one's foreign language speaking anxiety. Considering the relatively high scores of pronunciation belief and awareness shown in this study, these two variables are likely to be sources of anxiety in speaking foreign language, but we believe that more variables are required to better predict an EFL learner's conceptions of pronunciation.

It could also be argued that the personality of the participants influenced the result. Some students may be more likely to suffer from anxiety in any foreign language communication, whereas some might feel particularly anxious in a situation where another language skill is required (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). In this sense, personality questionnaires that examine whether the informants are more prone to feel foreign language speaking anxiety should be employed as a baseline in future research.

## 5. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Several limitations of this study need to be recognised when interpreting the results. First of all, the present study examined only a small group of learners in a specific language learning environment, and thus might not make generalisation of the findings possible. Inferences drawn from the outcome of this study are limited by the nature of the particular samples used. Due to the nature of the science related department of the university in Japan, the vast majority of the participants were male college students. The English proficiency levels of the participants were mostly low-intermediate (equivalent to A1 in CEFR terms). We must therefore consider that the relatively low and narrow range of English proficiency levels among the participants had an impact on the results. Those participants might have never been involved in meaningful conversations in English, and therefore probably do not know what it feels like to experience communication breakdowns due to their poor English pronunciation or inability to continue a conversation. Replication of the study with language learners of varying levels of proficiency and backgrounds in different learning contexts is necessary to understand how well the findings may be generalised to other EFL students. Future research, therefore, needs to examine higher English proficiency participants, or the contents of the questionnaires should be based on communication that students actually experienced, even if it occurs only in the classroom.

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## Appendix A

Anxiety over Speaking in Foreign Language in the Classroom	
Anx 1	授業であてられて英語で答えると分かったとき、私はドキドキするのを感じることもある。
Anx 2	授業中に英語で話しているとき、私は緊張したり混乱したりする。
Anx 3	私は、授業で英語を話すときに間違いを恐れぬ。
Anx 4	授業中に英語で答える場合、自分から発言するのはためらわれる。
Anx 5	授業中に準備なしで英語を話さなければならないとき、私はあわててしまう。
Anx 6	私は、授業中に自信を持って英語で話せる。
Anx 7	しっかり準備してきても、私は授業中に英語で話すのに不安を感じる。
Anx 8*	私は、自分より他の学生のほうが英語を話すのが上手だと感じる。

Pronunciation Belief and Awareness	
Pro 1	私にとって「良い」英語の発音で話すことは重要だ。
Pro 2	私は、英語を話すときは、英語ネイティブスピーカーのような発音で話すことを目標とするべきだと思う。
Pro 3	私は「良い」英語の発音ができるように、英語を話す時に意識している（気をつけている）。

**Pro 1 & 3 :** あなたにとって、「良い」英語の発音とはどのような発音ですか？  
単語だけでも、箇条書きでもよいのでなんでも自由にイメージをお書きください。

## Appendix B

- 性別： 女      男      (どちらかに○をつけて下さい)
- 学年： \_\_\_\_\_年
- 母国語：
- あなたはこれまで、海外に3ヶ月以上滞在した経験がありますか。  
はい      いいえ      (国名： \_\_\_\_\_)