

Anxiety, Interaction, and English Communication

Social Anxiety

A fear that occurs when people become concerned about how they are being perceived or evaluated by others. (Leary & Kowalski, 1997)

Forms of anxiety involving interpersonal evaluation, e.g., stage fright, shyness, audience anxiety, communication apprehension, or social-evaluative anxiety, can be subsumed under this construct. (Leary, 1982)

The anxiety learners experience when communicating can be debilitating in the moment, causing them to speak less, interact less frequently, and share less information with others. (Woodrow, 2006), McCroskey & Richmond, 1992).

Anxiety for Japanese Learners of English

The Japanese language classroom can be, *“a highly public social performance situation in which one’s behaviour and utterances are open to the scrutiny of others”* (King & Smith, 2017, p. 99).

Learners can feel as if they are being observed and judged by other learners, leading to a disproportionate concern with producing grammatically-correct English and comprehensible pronunciation, and even whether what they were saying is interesting to others. (King & Smith, 2017).

Anxious learners favor “safer” learning activities (i.e., non-oral production activities), even when this tendency limits opportunities for learning (Ehrman, 1996).

First-year university students, who find themselves in an unfamiliar social environment, may be especially susceptible to social anxiety, which interaction with unfamiliar peers has been shown to elicit. (Zakahi, Jordan & Christopel, 1993).

Anxiety in Foreign-language Education

- ❖ Learner social anxiety represents an under-examined area of inquiry.
- ❖ Anxiety indicated as crucial in mediating language-learning outcomes. (King & Smith, 2017; Zhou, 2016)

Research Objectives

This study adds to existing research on the impact of anxiety on language learning, which Dykes (2017) and Zhou (2016) have indicated as lacking, by addressing the following questions:

- 1) What are the effects of an interaction-focused curriculum on learners’ experiences of anxiety?
- 2) What factors may be identified as mediating learners’ feelings of unease?

First-year English Communication Course

A full-year, required English communication course comprising two 90-minute classes per week, for a total of 60 over the academic year at a private university where students are primarily enrolled in STEM majors.

Course Goal:

Facilitate the development of learners’ interaction and communication skills through extended, unrehearsed conversations (of between 5 and 10 minutes length), with multiple partners, on topics that connect directly with learners’ lives (e.g., their hobbies, music, YouTube, their favorite places, etc).

Course Rationale:

- (1) to rectify the deficit in communication skills common among Japanese learners of English;
- (2) to focus on a single English skill (speaking) in order to facilitate demonstrable improvement within the limited amount of contact time of a university English course.

Method and Results

Design: Explanatory Sequential (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017)

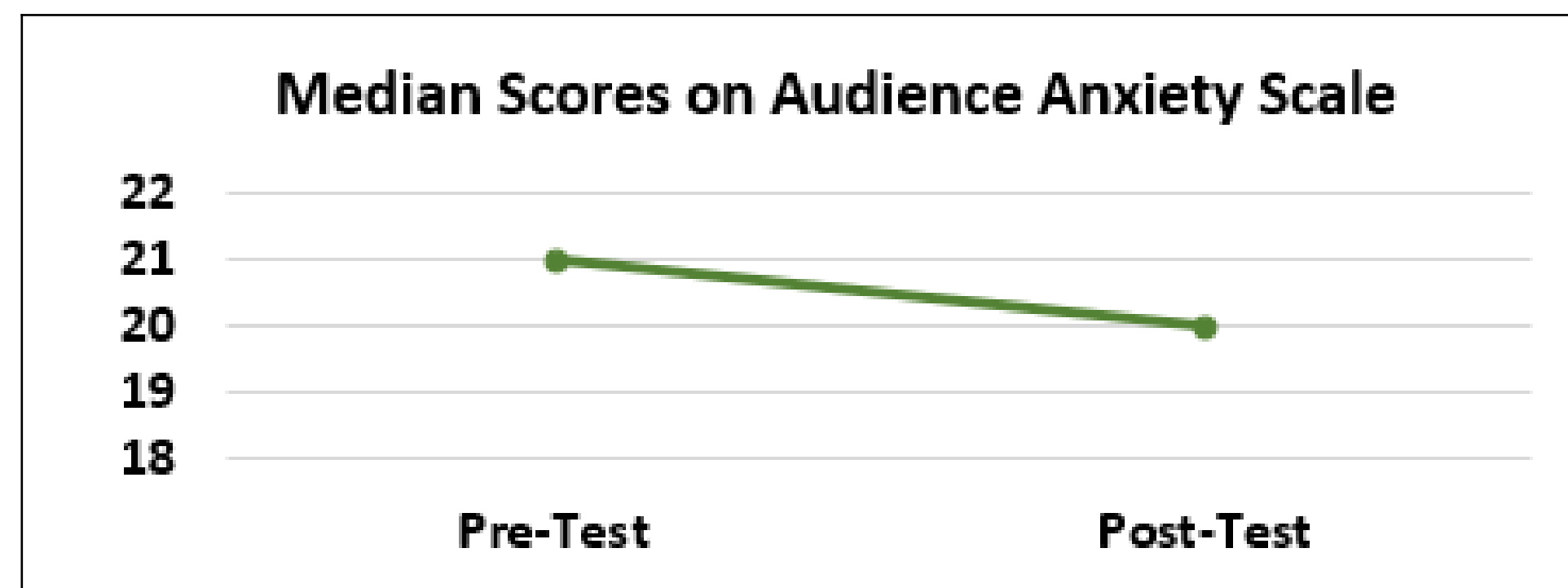
Participants: 810 first-year STEM majors (male=547; female=215; gender not indicated=48).

Instrument: Audience Anxiety Scale (Okabayashi & Seiwa, 1991)

Data Collection: Surveys given at beginning and end of first-term. A follow-up survey for qualitative data given during the second term.

Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test

Significant reduction in anxiety during the term.



$n = 558$; $Z = -4.68$, $p < .001$; $r = .15$

Corpus Analysis

Reduced Student Anxiety

- 26 instances of the word *anxiety* expressed student belief that anxiety had lessened as the course progressed.

Example:

[#146] *Little by little I became able to speak English, so my anxiety decreased.*

Increased Interactional Opportunities

- 52 instances indicated learner belief that the course afforded increased communication opportunities .

Examples:

[#617] *Through English class, opportunities to speak increased.*

[#364] *There were many activities for pairs and groups of four, so it was enjoyable.*

“I Got Used to It” – Student Acclimation

- Instances of the phrase *get used to (nareru)* appeared 118 times.

Examples:

[#118] *Little by little I became used to speaking.*

[#90] *As I got used to university life, I made friends who I could talk easily with.*

Discussion

- ❖ Learners connected the easing of anxiety with acclimation to classmates, as well as the importance of others’ evidencing helping attitudes and behaviors during communication.
- ❖ Students who believed that social bonds with communication partners had strengthened, reported reductions in anxiety.

Implications

- ❖ Interpersonal factors may be equally—if not more—important than repeated engagement in communicative activities.
- ❖ A consideration of interpersonal variables is critical if social anxiety—an impediment to communicative development—is to be addressed.
- ❖ Acclimation to peers contributes to a greater degree of closeness through the repeated sharing of personal information in decentralized, small-scale communicative activities.
- ❖ Establishment of student familiarity and friendship may contribute to the creation of a learning environment in which learners perceived reduced evaluation from peers.
- ❖ Providing ESL/EFL students with increased opportunities to communicate may result in increased comfort with the language.



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