〈研究ノート〉

Factors influencing student performance in Japanese university English classes

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Abstract

The researcher set out to ascertain to what extent a group of Japanese university students' attitudes to EFL classes were influenced by 7 selected factors: 1）international orientation, 2）communication anxiety in English, 3）self-perception of English speaking competence, 4）past English classroom experiences, 5）present English classroom experience, 6）beliefs about group work, and 7）perceived social value of speaking English. Participants' responses were compared with the author's observation of those groups' performance in the classroom. 258 undergraduate university students in the Kanto area responded to a 28-item questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. Responses supported Yashima's finding of a link between international orientation and English ability（2002）. Foreign Language Communication Anxiety （FLCA）was found to be an issue for students with TOEIC scores ranging from low to high. In many cases this communication anxiety appeared together with low self-perception of English speaking competence and reports of negative English classroom experiences in the past. In cases where groups with comparatively high TOEIC scores and positive self-perception of English ability reported communication anxiety in the classroom, it is theorized that challenging material and an academically competitive environment combined to generate a fear of social evaluation and test anxiety. Respondent groups in this study which reported the least communication anxiety were classes with a small number of students who knew each other well. It is believed that these low levels of anxiety were brought about through a supportive,

non-competitive relationship among students, with the teacher playing an important role in engendering this positive classroom environment. It is the argument of this paper that if using English in the classroom and positively engaging with peers can be made socially rewarding for students, learning English will cease to be viewed as a threat and instead become an affirmation of students' identities. It is recommended that teachers make every effort to foster a classroom atmosphere in which this can occur.

要　旨

　今回は日本の大学生が考える EFL（外国語としての英語）が，下記に述べている７つの要因によって左右される事について研究しました。その要因とは，1）国際志向の強さ，2）英語でのコミュニケーションに対する不安，3）英会話能力に対する自己評価，4）過去に経験した英語教育の影響，5）現在受講している英語授業での経験，6）グループワークの必要性についての考え方，7）英語の社会的価値に対する考え方，の７つが考えられます。関東地方の大学生 258 名に対し，5 点リッカート尺度を用いて 28 項目のアンケートを実施しました。その結果，国際志向と英語能力との関連性は，2002 年に八島が記した論文内の「国際志向と英語能力の関連性」の内容と同様の結果となりました。TOEIC の点数に関わらず，英語でのコミュニケーションに対する不安（FLCA）はあります。多くの場合，コミュニケーションの不安は，英会話能力に対する自己評価の低さや，過去の英語教育での否定的な経験からきていると思われます。一方で，TOEIC スコアが比較的高く英語力の自己評価も肯定的なグループが，英語のコミュニケーションに対する不安を報告した場合，未経験の領域とプレッシャーのある環境が組み合わさって，他者からの評価と，テストを受ける事に対する不安を生み出すと理論づけられています。コミュニケーションの不安が最も少ないと報告されたグループは，お互いをよく知っている少数の学生で構成されたクラスでした。それは，学生たちがお互いに協力的で，非競争的な関係によってもたらされたと考えられ，教師は，この前向きな環境を生み出す上で重要な役割を果たしています。この論文の着目点は，教室で仲間と積極的に英語を使用して関わる事がお互いに相乗効果となりやりがいが生まれ，英語を学ぶ事が脅威でなくなり，代わりに学生のアイデンティティの肯定につながるというところです。教師は，この様な教室の雰囲気をつくる為にあらゆる努力が必要です。

Introduction

Readers may have felt, or else heard other university English teachers say something along the lines of "the students in this class are really quiet", "my next class is a great group", "those students just refuse to talk", "that class teaches itself", "it's like trying to get blood from a stone with that group", "why can't this class be more like my first period group?" etc. Many of us instinctively make value judgments about individual students or groups without pausing to consider what forces are at work on those students, and how these lead to our own positive or negative appraisal of students' attitudes in class. Tolstoy famously said "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Can something similar be said of university English classes in Japan? This study investigates some of the various underlying causes or beliefs that shape Japanese university students' attitudes to their English classes, with the goal of assisting teachers in identifying how they might better meet the needs of various individual students or groups with different levels of English ability and motivation.

Several factors have been posited as playing a role in students' willingness to communicate, and these factors may also influence teachers' unconscious assessment of what makes a "good" or "bad" student or class. These factors, which at times overlap or affect each other, are briefly introduced below.

International Posture

Yashima（2002）investigates the concept of international posture, in which she includes "interest in foreign or international affairs, willingness to go overseas to stay or work, readiness to interact with intercultural partners, and …. openness or a non-ethnocentric attitude toward different cultures"（p. 57）. Yashima found that international posture influences student motivation, which in turn influences English proficiency.

Communication Anxiety

Two components of international posture studied by Yashima, intercultural friendship orientation and desire to speak English, were also investigated by Apple as part of his study of foreign language speaking confidence among Japanese EFL students (2011). Apple looked at these components in relation to communication anxiety in English, another major factor in students' willingness to communicate. Foreign Language Communication Anxiety (FLCA) is described as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope 1986, p. 128). Horwitz et al. describe three main causes of FLCA: communication apprehension, social evaluation, and test anxiety.

All three of these can be seen in the Japanese context. In Yasuda's study of cognitive styles in Japanese adult EFL learners, he reports that Japanese students tend to be more reflective than impulsive, leading to cautiousness and fear of making mistakes (2019, p. 11). He also suggests that a passive learning style, common among Japanese learners of English, may lead them to "···tend to underestimate themselves as powerless individuals who should not express strong opinions and regard the teacher as a person who would directly give necessary information and knowledge mostly in one direction" (p12). Similarly, Cutrone identifies inexperience and cultural inhibitions in dealing with Western teaching methods, (e.g: emphasis on individualism, challenging the teacher, offering opinions), as causes of communication anxiety in Japanese students of English (2009, p. 58). He also describes social evaluation (in the form of intense pressure and competition among Japanese learners in childhood), and test anxiety leading to a fear of making mistakes (p. 59).

Self-perception of English speaking competence

Both Yashima (2002) and Apple (2011) studied Japanese English

learners' perception of their own English speaking competence. Yashima found that perception of L2 communication competence, combined with a lower level of anxiety, led to a higher level of Willingness To Communicate（WTC）, although higher proficiency was not found to lead to greater confidence（p. 62）. Apple found a strong correlation between desire to speak English（which he links with Yashima's concept of international posture）and perceived foreign language speaking self-competence. As with Yashima's finding that higher proficiency did not necessarily lead to greater confidence, Apple's structural regression model indicated that "...not only does the desire to speak lead directly to anxiety about speaking, but that perceptions of competence in speaking English leads both to anxiety and the desire to speak"（Apple, 2011, p. 313）. In making sense of this 'two steps forward, one step back' finding, Apple goes on to argue that Foreign Language Classroom Speaking Confidence does not occur in isolation within individual students, but "...can be heightened or subdued in accordance with the support or lack of support from peers in the foreign language classroom"（Ibid.）.

Past and present English classroom experiences

Although motivation is often considered an attribute of individual learners, Lamb reminds us that motivation is also a social construction, and that "...we strive for certain things in life as a result of our socialization in a particular community or society, and the extent to which we can act on our desires is also constrained by our social environment"（2016, p. 324）. Kikuchi（2019）found this to be true in his case study of motivation and demotivation in Japanese learners of English, reporting that all participants were affected by the motivation of classmates and/or teachers, often in a negative fashion（p. 173）. Cutrone also argues that the demeanor and attitude of teachers is one of the most important factors in shaping Japanese learners' attitudes to English classes（2009, p. 58）. This is reflected in Apple's study, where

he found that students' negative experiences in high-school may be "...counterbalanced by the perception of a positive, supportive classroom atmosphere in the current university English classroom". For this reason, Apple echoes Cutrone's argument about the crucial role of the teacher in forming the overall atmosphere in the EFL classroom (2011, p. 321-322).

Beliefs about group work / Willingness to communicate in a group in English

In addition to general Willingness To Communicate, another important factor which has been found to influence Japanese university students' attitudes to their EFL classes is beliefs about L2 group work. Particularly in oral communication classes, the use of pair work and group work has become standard in EFL classrooms. Fushino (2010) found that by building students' communication confidence in L2 group work and creating positive beliefs about L2 group work, it is possible for teachers to bring about more active interaction between students in L2 group work.

Perceived social value of speaking English

Apple distinguishes between perceived social value of speaking English inside and outside the EFL classroom. He suggests that for some students, a desire to speak English is directly influenced by their perception of the value placed on speaking English within society at large, which can lead to a more positive attitude towards EFL class. This in turn has an indirect effect on those students' desire to speak English by contributing to a positive environment for using English in the classroom. On the other hand, Apple argues that students who do not see value in speaking English outside the classroom may nevertheless be influenced to speak English in the classroom by classmates' positive attitudes (2011, p. 320-321).

However, this is not always the case. With regard to negative

perceptions of the social value of speaking English, the ethnolinguistic identity theory of Hildebrandt and Giles（1983）can be used to understand how some students may feel their social identity and self-image to be threatened in the context of the EFL classroom. Hildebrandt and Giles assert that we all have a social identity built from membership of certain groups or categories, and that we give meaning to this identity through social comparisons with other relevant groups. They argue that "...we try to achieve a positive sense of social identity in such a way as to make our own social group favorably distinct from other collectivities on valued dimensions, e.g. power, economic resources, intellectual attributes"（pp. 438-439）. In the context of a Japanese university EFL class, imagine a student who feels anxiety when communicating in English, lacks confidence in their own English speaking ability, who has perhaps had negative experiences in English classrooms in the past, and perceives a negative comparison with their classmates' abilities. Such a student may attempt to reinforce their social identity and sense of self by strongly identifying with a Japanese ethnolinguistic identity, in a process which Hildebrandt and Giles label 'in-group differentiation'（p. 439）. In this way, these students attempt to renegotiate group comparisons of dimensions mentioned above: power （where English is the dominant language of the EFL classroom, symbolized by the teacher）, and intellectual attributes （negative self-perception of English speaking competence in comparison with classmates）. This may manifest itself in an unwillingness to respond to questions using English, or using Japanese-influenced *katakana* pronunciation when speaking in English. Although Hildebrandt and Giles note that this kind of signaling of in-group solidarity may not necessarily be a conscious tactic（p. 452）, by making Japanese ethnicity and language the focus of their social identity in this situation, such students exclude users of English from their in-group, and thus nullify the perceived threat to their sense of self.

Objective

The purpose of this paper is to present the results of a study, informed by the literature above, into the attitudes to EFL classes of students of varying levels of English competence, of different majors, and at different universities.

The goals of this study were to ascertain the following:

1. to what extent participants' attitudes to EFL classes are influenced by the

various factors outlined above.

2. to what extent the responses of each group of participants align with the author's observation of those groups' performance in the classroom.

It was hoped that a clearer understanding of these two points might help the author to better meet the various needs of students in Japanese university EFL classes, needs which vary from class to class and also among students within each class. Although the findings of the study are necessarily subjective to some degree, it is believed that the insights gained may be of benefit to other teachers of Japanese university EFL classes, as well as suggesting possible directions for future research.

Method

Participants

There were 258 participants in the present study, drawn from five private universities in the Kanto area with enrollments of between five and ten thousand students. All participants were undergraduates, ranging from first to fourth year, in one of 18 classes. Of these, the author was privy to individual TOEIC test results for six classes, with the remainder of classes having been streamed according to the range into which students' previous TOEIC test results fell.

152 participants were female and 106 were male. No international students were included in the study.（See *Table 1* for more information about each class.）

These groups were selected because they were classes taught by the author, and it was hoped that the variety of majors and backgrounds included would make for a useful sample. All participants volunteered, with no promise of compensation, extra class credit, or other inducements, and only one student declined to participate.

The study was conducted during the 2019-2020 academic year, prior to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was created using Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of a total of 28 statements to which participants responded using a five-point Likert scale. All items were presented in both English and Japanese, with the translations done in collaboration with a native Japanese speaking colleague.

A pilot study was conducted with two classes of 16 students each （classes 15 and 16 in *Table 1*）. The URL for the questionnaire was transformed into a QR code which was projected onto a large screen in the classroom. By pointing their smartphone cameras at the QR code, students accessed the questionnaire using the built-in QR scanner function. While most students were able to access the questionnaire with no trouble, it was found that a small number of students using older smartphones had difficulty scanning the QR code if the classroom was too bright. This was easily rectified by having these students scan the QR code directly from the teacher's laptop screen. No other issues arose.

Although the questionnaire responses were completely anonymous, by looking at the original Google Form on the website the teacher was able to monitor the number of completed responses as they were submitted, and thus easily determine when participants had finished.

The same procedure was repeated with the remaining 16 classes.

Table 1 Description of participant groups

Class Number	Major	Year Level	Class Type	TOEIC score range	Number of respondents
1	Business	2nd	Business English	470-890	7
2	Business	2nd	Business English	355-665	15
3	Various majors	1st	Listening & Speaking	250-350	17
4	Various majors	1st	Listening & Speaking	250-350	14
5	Social Studies	2nd	Listening & Speaking	400-500	11
6	Social Studies	2nd	Listening & Speaking	250-500	18
7	Social Studies	1st	Listening & Speaking	170-350	19
8	Social Studies	1st	Listening & Speaking	250-350	18
9	Economics	1st	Listening & Speaking	450-550	18
10	Science & Engineering	1st, 2nd, & 3rd	Listening & Speaking (Repeaters)	170-350	5
11	Social Innovation	2nd	Business Reading & Writing	500-800	17
12	Social Innovation	2nd	Business Reading & Writing	500-750	16
13	Social Innovation	1st	Academic English	500-890	18
14	Social Innovation	2nd	Presentation	350-550	8
15	Various majors	1st	Listening & Speaking	250-350	15
16	Various majors	1st	Listening & Speaking	250-350	16
17	Various majors	2nd, 3rd, & 4th	Presentation	600-900	5
18	Various majors	1st	Reading & Writing	680-800	21

Results

For clarity, results are presented below grouped according to general theme. It should be noted that these themes were not explicitly stated in the questionnaire itself, only the statements.

Table 2 *International Orientation ／ Intercultural friendship orientation ／ Desire to Speak English*

Item	1	2	3	4	5	SD	M
1. I would like to live overseas someday. いつか海外に住みたい。	54 (19.5%)	80 (28.9%)	58 (20.9%)	53 (19.1%)	32 (11.6%)	1.3	2.7
2. I often read or watch news about other countries. 外国に関するニュースをよく読んだり観たりする。	22 (7.9%)	69 (24.9%)	76 (27.4%)	64 (23.1%)	46 (16.6%)	1.2	3.2
3. I want to speak English with people from different countries. いろいろな国から来た人と英語で話をしたい。	86 (31%)	76 (27.4%)	71 (25.6%)	32 (11.6%)	12 (4.3%)	1.2	2.3
4. I want to visit English-speaking countries. 英語を話す国に行きたい。	102 (36.8%)	71 (25.6%)	55 (19.9%)	37 (13.4%)	12 (4.3%)	1.2	2.2

Notes. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree. Figures shown are number of student responses.

Table 3 *Communication anxiety in English*

Item	1	2	3	4	5	SD	M
5. I feel uncomfortable giving my opinion in class. 授業中に自分の意見を言うのは好きじゃない。	23 (8.3%)	46 (16.6%)	96 (34.7%)	70 (25.3%)	42 (15.2%)	1.1	3.2
6. I feel nervous speaking English in front of the entire class. クラス全体の前で英語を話すとあがってしまう。	58 (20.9%)	74 (26.7%)	64 (23.1%	52 (18.8%)	29 (10.5%)	1.3	2.7
7. I'm worried about making mistakes while speaking English. 英語を話すときに間違いを犯すのではないかと心配になる。	67 (24.2%)	109 (39.4%)	48 (17.3%)	36 (13%)	17 (6.1%)	1.2	2.4
8. I feel nervous when I can't express my opinion in English. 自分の意見を英語で表現できないと，あがってしまう。	48 (17.3%)	102 (36.8%)	54 (19.5%)	48 (17.3%	25 (9%)	1.2	2.6

Notes. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree. Figures shown are number of student responses.

Table 4 *Self-perception of English speaking competence*

Item	1	2	3	4	5	SD	M
9. I can order food in English in a restaurant. レストランでの料理の注文を，英語ですることができる。	20 (7.2%)	58 (20.9%)	69 (24.9%)	86 (31%)	44 (15.9%)	1.2	3.3
10. I can introduce myself in English to a classmate during pair work. ペア・ワークの際，クラスメートに英語で自己紹介ができる。	70 (25.3%)	107 (38.6%)	65 (23.5%)	27 (9.7%)	8 (2.9%)	1.0	2.3
11. I can talk about my hobbies in English during pair work with a classmate. クラスメートとのペア・ワークの際，自分の趣味について英語で話す ことができる。	60 (21.7%)	100 (36.1%)	69 (24.9%)	36 (13%)	12 (4.3%)	1.1	2.4
12. I can give street directions in English to a foreigner. 外国の人に英語で道案内を示すことができる。	21 (7.6%)	69 (24.9%)	86 (31%)	66 (23.8%)	35 (12.6%)	1.1	3.1

Notes. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree. Figures shown are number of student responses.

Table 5 *Past English classroom experiences*

Item	1	2	3	4	5	SD	M
13. I enjoyed speaking English with classmates in my high school English classes. 高校の英語の授業でクラスメートと英語で話すのは楽しかった。	51 (18.4%)	63 (22.7%)	79 (28.5%)	50 (18.1%)	34 (12.3%)	1.3	2.8
14. I liked my high school English teachers. 高校の英語の先生が好きだった。	47 (17%)	73 (26.4%)	73 (26.4%)	51 (18.4%)	33 (11.9%)	1.3	2.8
15. High school English classes had a comfortable atmosphere. 高校の英語の授業は雰囲気がよかった。	40 (14.4%)	71 (25.6%)	81 (29.2%)	53 (19.1%)	32 (11.6%)	1.2	2.9

Notes. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree. Figures shown are number of student responses.

Table 6 *Present English classroom experience*

Item	1	2	3	4	5	SD	M
16. I feel comfortable in this English class. 今の英語の授業で，居心地はよい。	151 (54.5%)	76 (27.4%)	34 (12.3%)	8 (2.9%)	8 (2.9%)	1.0	1.7
17. I get along with my current English classmates. 今の英語の授業でクラスメートと仲が良い。	129 (46.6%)	92 (33.2%)	42 (15.2%)	5 (1.8%)	9 (3.2%)	1.0	1.8
18. I enjoy speaking in English with classmates in my current English class. 今の授業でクラスメートと英語で話すのは楽しかった。	118 (42.6%)	90 (32.5%)	44 (15.9%)	18 (6.5%)	7 (2.5%)	1.0	1.9
19. I enjoy doing pair work in my current English class. 今の英語の授業でペア・ワークをするのは楽しかった。	128 (46.2%)	89 (32.1%)	39 (14.1%)	12 (4.3%)	9 (3.2%)	1.0	1.9

Notes. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree. Figures shown are number of student responses.

Table 7 *Beliefs about group work ／ Willingness to communicate in a group in English*

Item	1	2	3	4	5	SD	M
20. I feel nervous when I work in a group in English class. 英語の授業中にグループワークをすると，あがってしまう。	14 (5.1%)	40 (14.4%)	64 (23.1%)	71 (25.6%)	88 (31.8%)	1.2	3.6
21. If my group members ask me questions in English, I am willing to answer them in English. グループメンバーに英語で質問された時には，英語で答えたい。	78 (28.2%)	109 (39.4%)	64 (23.1%)	20 (7.2%)	6 (2.2%)	1.0	2.2
22. Group work is important for personal development. グループで協力する事は，人間の成長には必要だ。	156 (56.3%)	87 (31.4%)	24 (8.7%)	6 (2.2%)	4 (1.4%)	0.8	1.6
23. I learn well in a teacher-led class that has no group work. 講義形式（グループワークのない）の授業の方が学びやすい	24 (8.7%)	39 (14.1%)	74 (26.7%)	90 (32.5%)	50 (18.1%)	1.2	3.4

Notes. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree. Figures shown are number of student responses.

Table 8 *Perceived social value of speaking English*

Item	1	2	3	4	5	SD	M
24. My friends think that it's cool to speak English. 友達は英語が話せるのは格好いいと思っている。	123 (44.4%)	80 (28.9%)	57 (20.6%)	10 (3.6%)	7 (2.5%)	1.0	1.9
25. Japanese companies think highly of workers who have English speaking ability. 日本の会社は英語が話せる人を重要視している。	129 (46.6%)	105 (37.9%)	31 (11.2%)	9 (3.2%)	3 (1.1%)	0.9	1.7
26. My classmates want to speak in English during class. クラスメートは授業中に英語を話したがっている。	11 (4%)	38 (13.7%)	117 (42.2%)	87 (31.4%)	24 (8.7%)	0.9	3.3
27. Japanese people should only speak Japanese. 日本人は日本語だけを話すべきだ。	8 (2.9%)	9 (3.2%)	26 (9.4%)	78 (28.2%)	156 (56.3%)	1.0	4.3
28. When I speak English with people from other countries, I am representing Japan. 外国人と英語で話す時には，私は日本を代表している。	17 (6.1%)	32 (11.6%)	80 (28.9%)	76 (27.4%)	72 (26%)	1.2	3.6

Notes. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree. Figures shown are number of student responses.

Discussion

First, overall results shown above in Tables 2-8 will be examined. Following this, particularly noteworthy results for specific class groups from Table 1 will be discussed.

Items 1-4: International Orientation / Intercultural friendship orientation / Desire to Speak English

Judging by the results in *Table 2*, it seems that overall, participants had a moderate interest in using English outside the classroom and visiting English-speaking countries, even if there wasn't a strong desire

to actually live overseas. Students were on the whole not particularly focused on international news. However, it is possible that they were not interested in domestic news either, as this was not a topic investigated in the questionnaire. As per expectations, the lowest reported interest in living overseas, international news, speaking English with people from other countries, and visiting English-speaking countries came predominantly from among classes with the lowest TOEIC scores （Classes 3, 4, 10, and 15 in *Table 1*）. One notable exception was Class 1, where the mean response to *Item 1* "I would like to live overseas someday" was 3.9, compared with the overall mean of 2.7. Considering that members of Class 1 had some of the highest TOEIC scores of any participants （see again *Table 1*）, this goes against the tendency reported by Yashima （2002） for international posture to be linked with greater English proficiency. The speculation of this author is that these particular students, having socio-economic advantages and being academically inclined, see a promising future for themselves in Japan, and thus are not interested in living overseas, despite high English proficiency. However, this would need to be confirmed by future research.

There were consistent positive responses to the statements in *Items 1-4* from Classes 11 to 14, 17 and 18, which are groups with higher TOEIC scores （as can be seen in *Table 1*）. Notwithstanding the exception noted above for Class 1, the results of this study bear out Yashima's finding of a link between international / intercultural orientation and English ability.

Items 5-8: Communication anxiety in English

The results in Table 3 indicate that there was more anxiety around communicating in English specifically than in giving an opinion in class in general. This may give pause to some English instructors who believe that Japanese university students are hesitant to give their opinions. Participants' self-perception seems to indicate otherwise （Item 5）.

Questionnaire items which referred specifically to English (Items 6–8) evinced more reports of anxiety. Interestingly, it is not only groups with lower English ability which reported anxiety. Some of the highest mean scores for anxiety by class were from those with higher English levels (Classes 1, 5, and 12 in Table 1). However, some of the lowest reported anxiety was also from high level groups (Classes 14 and 17 in Table 1). Horwitz et al. (1986) describe three main causes of Foreign Language Communication Anxiety: communication apprehension, social evaluation, and test anxiety. This can explain the divergence in anxiety levels reported by participant groups of comparable English ability. In classes of high English proficiency which reported above average levels of communication anxiety, it may be theorized that worry about making mistakes leads to more conscientiousness and care, and thus higher test scores. However, this may also hinder their fluency in speaking situations. Of the three classes mentioned of this type, Classes 1 and 12 are both Business English classes in which students encounter an especially high amount of unknown vocabulary. In the observation of this author, these groups were academically competitive with their classmates. Social evaluation and test anxiety appear to be factors here. Classes 14 and 17 which reported the least communication anxiety, were both presentation classes with a small number of students who knew each other well. Their high English proficiency combined with a supportive, non-competitive relationship between students, might explain their low levels of communication anxiety.

Interestingly, Class 8 (with TOEIC scores ranging from 250 to 350) reported markedly less anxiety than the overall average for 3 out of 4 items, despite having below average self-perception of English-speaking competence. It may be that these students feel liberated by this, so that they are less concerned with making mistakes when speaking, and in competing with their peers academically. As with Classes 14 and 17 mentioned above, and in line with the theory put forward by Horwitz et al., lack of fear of social evaluation seems to have lead to lower

communication anxiety in English.

Items 9-12: Self-perception of English speaking competence

In general, respondents reported more confidence in their ability to introduce themselves to a classmate and to talk to a classmate about their hobbies (see *Table 4*). These are things they would have done in class quite often. Ordering food in a restaurant and giving street directions, while common topics in EFL, are both situations outside of the classroom, and participants reported less confidence in their ability to do these.

Comparing mean responses for individual classes, there appears to be a connection between international orientation and desire to speak English (*Items 1-4*) on one hand, and self-perception of English speaking confidence on the other. This supports the findings of Yashima (2002) and Apple (2011). Groups which reported the lowest self-perception of English speaking confidence were mostly classes with lower TOEIC scores (Classes 3, 8, 10, and 15 in *Table 1*), although the high-level Class 1 did have a mean response of 3.6 for *Item 12* "I can give street directions in English to a foreigner", compared with an overall mean of 3.1 for all participants. Of these groups, Classes 1, 3, 10, and 15 also had mean responses below the average for items related to international orientation and desire to speak English. Groups which reported the highest self-perception of English speaking competence were Classes 11, 13, 14, 17, and 18. Apart from Class 14, these are all groups of students with comparatively high TOEIC scores (see *Table 1*). Here we see a positive relationship between international / intercultural orientation, self-perception of English speaking competence, proficiency as measured in TOEIC scores, and classroom performance as observed by this author. The fact that Class 1, with some of the highest TOEIC scores of any participants, was an outlier in its responses to *Item 12* makes sense in light of Yashima's finding that although perception of L2 communication competence, combined with a

lower level of anxiety, led to a higher level of Willingness To Communicate (WTC), higher proficiency was not found to lead to greater confidence (p. 62).

Items 13-15: Past English classroom experiences

The level of agreement with the Item 13 statement "I enjoyed speaking English with classmates in my high school English classes" was below the overall mean for the one repeaters class among the groups of respondents. This is in line with the expectation that negative experiences in English classes in high-school may be connected to a negative attitude to English classes in university, and thus in this case to poor performance which necessitated repeating the course. However, two groups with high TOEIC scores also reported below average agreement with statement in Item 13. It is not clear whether these students lacked the opportunity to speak English with classmates in high-school, or rather that they did have the opportunity but did not enjoy it.

Stronger agreement with the Item 14 statement "I liked my high-school English teachers" matched stronger agreement with the Item 15 statement "High school English classes had a comfortable atmosphere." This is perhaps unsurprising, underscoring the important role that the teacher plays in creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere.

Items 16-19: Present English classroom experience

In general, results indicated that respondents' current English classroom experience was a positive one, with mean responses of "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to the statements in Items 16-19. Comparing the results for present English classroom experience (*Table 6*) with reports of past English classroom experiences (*Table 5*), students reported a markedly more positive experience in their current English class. In discussing how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs relates to the classroom, Daley argues that meaningful pair work and group work

are good opportunities for students to from relationships both with their classmates and with their teacher, thus meeting their needs for love and belonging which is the third tier of Maslow's pyramid （2019, p. 5）. Responses for Items 16-19 suggest that something similar was the case for most participants in the current study. One group, Class number 2 in *Table 1*, was a notable exception. This group will be discussed in a separate section below.

Items 20-23: Beliefs about group work / Willingness to communicate in a group in English

Results indicated that respondents were generally willing to communicate in English in group work, and did not feel particularly nervous about this. They believed group work was important, and the majority reported no preference for teacher-led classes without group work. Respondent groups which reported the highest inclination towards teacher-led classes with no group work （with means of 2.8 or 2.9） were Classes 2, 3, and 7 （see *Table 1*） which were also those who expressed the least comfort using English in group work, or else were the of the lowest range of TOEIC scores.

Items 24-28: Perceived social value of speaking English

The perceived social value of speaking English was high, according to responses. The only group which did not agree with the statement in Item 25 "Japanese companies think highly of workers who have English speaking ability" was Class 17, with a mean of 3.4. This group featured the oldest students of all the participants, who have perhaps found in their job-hunting that English ability is not valued. There was strong disagreement with the statement in Item 27 "Japanese people should only speak Japanese", although the weakest disagreement was from among classes with the lowest TOEIC scores. This may derive from a feeling of defensiveness about their low English ability, and a desire to justify their sense of self in ethnolinguistic terms, as theorized by

Hildebrandt and Giles (1983). There was broad disagreement with the Item 28 statement "When I speak English with people from other countries, I am representing Japan." Weakest disagreement was from classes with students who had done overseas home-stays during the year. It is believed that these students had been told before going overseas that they would be representing Japan.

Common characteristics of classes with lower TOEIC scores

Results indicate several commonalities among respondent groups with lower TOEIC scores, in particular Class Numbers 3, 4, 10, and 15 (see *Table 1*). These groups reported lower than average desire to visit English-speaking countries or speak English with people from overseas, and less interest in living overseas someday and in international news. This seems to be in line with Yashima's findings that international posture influences student motivation, which in turn influences English proficiency (2002).

Reports from these groups in regard to "Communication anxiety in English" and "Self-perception of English speaking competence" are perhaps unsurprising. These groups reported a high degree of nervousness related to giving opinions in class and using English in front of their peers, expressing more worry about making mistakes in English and above average discomfort when unable to express themselves in English. The same groups reported low confidence in their own English ability. These results seem to bear out Cutrone's argument that elements of Western teaching methods, (e.g: emphasis on individualism, challenging the teacher, offering opinions) are causes of communication anxiety in some Japanese students of English (2009, p. 58). He also describes social evaluation (in the form of intense pressure and competition among Japanese learners in childhood), and test anxiety leading to a fear of making mistakes (p. 59).

Responses from Class 10 in particular were below average for both levels of enjoyment of speaking English with class-mates when they

were in high-school, and of a comfortable environment in high-school English class, whilst Class 15 reported having liked their high-school English teachers at levels lower than the mean.

According to responses from Classes 3 and 15, these groups were more nervous than average about group work in English class, and less inclined to believe that group work is important. Class 3 also reported an above-average preference for a teacher-led class.

Regarding "Perceived social value of speaking English", Class 3 was more inclined than average to believe that Japanese people should only speak Japanese, and that they themselves are representing Japan when speaking English with people from other countries. Class 10 reported a low level of belief that classmates want to speak English during class.

While none of these factors in isolation can explain the low TOEIC scores of these groups, a picture does emerge of a kind of feedback loop in which past experiences of studying English can negatively influence attitudes toward current university English classes, with decreased motivation and international posture leading to reduced willingness to communicate in English, which in turn leads to poorer classroom results which reinforce a low self-perception of English competence. This low self-evaluation then manifests itself in communication anxiety which negatively influences motivation levels and willingness to communicate, and so-on in a negative spiral. While the direction of causality is not identical in the case of every student, the chicken-and-egg nature of these relationships matches the description of Foreign Language Communication Anxiety (FLCA) as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope 1986, p. 128).

Common characteristics of classes whose performance was highly rated by the teacher

Among the groups of respondents in this study, the author's

subjective experience of teaching Classes 13, 14, 17, and 18 was particularly positive. Analysis of responses from these groups shows an almost complete contradistinction to those of Classes 3, 4, 10 and 15 discussed above.

Firstly, results evinced a high desire among these classes to visit English-speaking countries, and to speak English with people from overseas, as well as interest in living overseas someday. Mean responses for each of these groups indicated high levels of confidence in their own English ability, and (for Classes 13, 14, and 17) low degree of nervousness around using English.

Classes 13 and 18 reported especially positive experiences of past English classes. Regarding current English classroom experiences, Classes 14, 17, and 18 reported above average levels of enjoyment of speaking English with classmates, and below average levels of nervousness in group work. Class 17 in particular reported an above average belief in the importance of group work, while results for Class 18 showed a below-average belief that they learn well in a teacher-led class with no group work.

Regarding the perceived social value of speaking English, responses from Class 14 showed a strong disagreement with the idea that Japanese people should only speak Japanese. Interestingly, whereas Class 17 reported a particularly low level of belief that they were representing Japan when speaking English with people from other countries, responses from Class 18 actually showed an above average belief in the same. This can possibly be explained by the fact that many students in Class 18 had undertaken overseas home-stays during the summer break, and had been told specifically that they were in fact "representing Japan". In the context of their responses to other items in the questionnaire however, these contradictory responses from Classes 17 and 18 can perhaps be seen as different manifestations of the same belief in the social value of speaking English. Students in Class 17, whose responses suggest an overall comfort with and confidence in using

English, may have felt no need to engage in the ethnically-based 'in-group differentiation' described by Hildebrandt and Giles（p. 439）. Members of Class 18 on the other hand, whose overall responses also evinced a strong international orientation and positive attitude towards using English, might have felt proud to represent Japan using English during their time abroad.

Mixed messages

While the positive and negative characteristics（from a teacher's standpoint）discussed in the preceding two sections seem to map clearly onto groups of students with either higher or lower TOEIC scores, results for some classes paint a more ambiguous picture. Classes 1 and 2 （see *Table 1*）include students with some of the highest TOEIC scores of any respondents, and share several characteristics with the groups which were subjectively rated positively by the author. Classes 1 and 2 both reported being more comfortable than average in giving opinions in class, and responses form Class 1 in particular evinced lower than average levels of nervousness about making mistakes in English. Nevertheless, responses from these groups indicate *communication apprehension*, *social evaluation*, and *test anxiety*, which are the three main causes of Foreign Language Communication Anxiety described by Horwitz et al.（1986）.

These two classes were made up of Business majors studying Business English in an academically competitive university. The content of the course featured a large amount of vocational business vocabulary which was unfamiliar to most students, as well as business-related situations with which the students had no experience. Students who were able to achieve a TOEIC score of 600 or higher within a prescribed period could pass the course with the highest possible grade while being excused from attending classes from that point on. This seemed to be a motivational factor, with the number of students who were required to attend classes declining over the course of the year.

However, the remaining students appeared to be conscious of their status as those who had not yet achieved the target TOEIC score. This instrumental motivation may be related to the test anxiety and fear of negative social evaluation evident in responses from these two classes. Class 1 reported that while they did not enjoy speaking English with classmates in high-school English classes (on average), they did enjoy speaking English with classmates in the current class. However, this group also reported above average levels of nervousness when working in a group in English class. Furthermore, responses from this group indicated that they did not feel that their friends think speaking English is cool, and did not feel that classmates wanted to speak English during class. Class 2 responses were below the overall mean for comfort in the current class, getting along with current classmates, enjoyment of speaking English in this class and enjoyment of pair work in this class. These results for Classes 1 and 2 suggest that the perceived social value of speaking English for these groups was mostly instrumental. Test anxiety and fear of social evaluation in a competitive academic environment appear to have led to communication apprehension here.

Implications

The father of "learner-centered teaching", Carl Rogers, argued that the background and experiences of the learner are integral to how each student processes what they learn (1951). The results of the present study have several implications for how teachers of university English classes in Japan might better understand what their students bring to the classroom, so that we may more effectively tailor our teaching to the specific needs of our various students.

Responses in this study indicated that students felt more anxiety around communicating in English specifically than in giving an opinion in class in general. This may give pause to some English instructors who believe that Japanese university students are hesitant to give their

opinions. Responses also supported Yashima's finding of a link between international／intercultural orientation and English ability（2002）, showing a positive relationship between international orientation, self-perception of English speaking competence, proficiency as measured in TOEIC scores, and classroom performance as observed by this author. However, higher proficiency in English did not necessarily lead to greater confidence in using English. In some classes of high English proficiency where communication anxiety is an issue, it may be theorized that worry about making mistakes leads to more conscientiousness and care, and thus higher test scores, but this may also hinder students' fluency in speaking situations. Respondent groups in this study which reported the least communication anxiety were classes with a small number of students who knew each other well. Their high English proficiency combined with a supportive, non-competitive relationship between students, may explain their low levels of communication anxiety.

Negative experiences of past English classes often correlated with poor performance in current classes, but not always. It appears that it is possible to turn around initial poor attitudes by creating a positive, non-threatening classroom atmosphere in which students feel secure. This can be brought about through meaningful pair work and group work, which are good opportunities for students to form relationships both with their classmates and with their teacher. It is important for teachers to ensure that material is relevant and related to students' experience, while at the same time gently encouraging open-mindedness in engaging with new material. Several classes in the present study, made up of students with relatively low TOEIC scores, proved to be very positive teaching experiences for the author after these steps were taken.

Regardless of TOEIC scores, the few classes in the study which were not a positive experience from the teacher's standpoint were those in which mean responses were below average for levels of comfort in

the class, getting along with classmates, enjoyment of speaking English in the class and enjoyment of pair work in the class. Responses from these groups also indicated that they did not believe their classmates wanted to speak English during class. In the observation of the author, students in these classes tended to have instrumental motivation rather than integrative motivation.

Thus, it appears that the most important factor for classes of any level is assuaging communication anxiety and bolstering willingness to communicate. When a teacher feels that a particular class is not demonstrating the desired attitude, it may be helpful to consider the classroom experience from students' points of view. If students do not appear to have much interest in anything outside of Japan, it may be possible to stimulate this interest by showing connections with their lived experience. Resistance to engaging with material with international themes was found in this study to be linked to anxiety about communicating in English, so that this may be remedied through ensuring a supportive classroom environment which does not threaten students' sense of self. As negative self-perception of English speaking competence was found to impact willingness to communicate, thus hindering the development of a supportive classroom culture, it is recommended that positive reinforcement be used to build up the confidence of students who feel anxiety around using English. Teachers should bear in mind that some students come to university English classes with negative experiences and impressions of learning English, and may need patient encouragement before they are able to perform in a manner desired by the teacher. Acting-out or troublesome in-class behaviour by individual students may actually be a sign of lack of confidence in their English ability and fear of social evaluation by peers. If using English in the classroom and positively engaging with peers can be made socially rewarding for these students, learning English will cease to be viewed as a threat and instead become an affirmation of students' identities. In the experience of this author, teaching learners

like these is much more enjoyable, and this enjoyment is evident to students in the class, feeding back into a positive classroom environment.

There are some limitations to this study. Elements related to the author's observation and experience of classroom performance are necessarily subjective to a degree, and some speculation regarding factors which influence student motivation took place. Other factors beyond the scope of this study may also be found to affect student attitudes to university English classes. The results of the present study suggest several questions for future research, among which are these:

- ・What is the influence of socio-economic background on the factors investigated here?
- ・What other actions can teachers take to encourage more of the positive characteristics mentioned? Would this be beneficial for teachers, students, or both?
- ・Responses in this study painted a picture of a kind of feedback loop of factors influencing each other to bring about either positive or negative classroom outcomes. Is it possible to demonstrate at a more granular level how these factors interact with each other, such that educators might direct them towards desired outcomes?

Conclusion

This study set out to ascertain to what extent a group of Japanese university students' attitudes to EFL classes were influenced by selected factors, comparing participants responses with the author's observation of those groups' performance in the classroom. Responses supported Yashima's finding of a link between international / intercultural orientation and English ability（2002）. Foreign Language Communication Anxiety（FLCA）was found to be an issue for students with TOEIC scores ranging from low to high. In many cases this

communication anxiety appeared together with low self-perception of English speaking competence and reports of negative English classroom experiences in the past. These factors seemed to affect each other in a kind of feed-back loop. Some groups with comparatively high TOEIC scores and positive self-perception of English ability nevertheless reported communication anxiety in the classroom. It is theorized that challenging material and an academically competitive environment combined to generate a fear of social evaluation and test anxiety in these classes.

Respondent groups in this study which reported the least communication anxiety were classes with a small number of students who knew each other well. It is believed that these low levels of anxiety were brought about through a supportive, non-competitive relationship among students, with the teacher playing an important role in engendering this positive classroom environment. It is the contention of the this author that if using English in the classroom and positively engaging with peers can be made socially rewarding for students, learning English will cease to be viewed as a threat and instead become an affirmation of students' identities. It is recommended that teachers make every effort to foster a classroom atmosphere in which this can occur.

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