

# **Affective Factors of Japanese EFL Learners at Junior College in the Oral Communication Tasks**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to investigate the use of the affective factors of the successful learners and the less successful ones in the oral communicative tasks, because it is believed that affective factors are closely related with proficiency. A focus is given on two main affective factors: 'anxiety' and 'high self-esteem' with the related concept of the strategy of 'risk-taking'. They are discussed based on the self-reported data collected in the two communicative speaking tasks. The data show some contradictory attitudes of the successful learners in that the low self-evaluation co-exists with a positive attitude of 'risk-taking'. This discrepancy is analyzed from various points of view. The investigation sheds light on peculiar affective factors of the Japanese female EFL learners at Junior College in the communicative tasks.

## **1. Introduction**

The affective side of the learner is probably one of the very biggest influence on language learning success or failure (Oxford 1996). Good language learners are often those who know how to control their emotions and attitudes about learning (Naiman, Frohlich, and Todesco, 1975; Wenden 1986b). Negative feelings can stunt progress, even for the rare learner who fully understands all the technical aspects of how to learn a new language. On the other hand, positive emotions and attitudes can make language learning far more effective and enjoyable. However, it is often reported that the learners feel much

'anxiety' in the language learning. What became apparent from some studies is that the 'interpersonal' aspects of language learning, namely speaking and listening, seems to be the greatest source of anxiety among students. This point is made particularly strongly by Horwitz et al. (1986).

Therefore, quite a number of teachers (Graham 1997) are aware of the need to boost students' confidence, both in terms of oral participation and confidence in their general linguistic abilities. Especially for the English teachers in Japan, it is a very important issue to discuss today when the Ministry of Education and the society have begun to put great value on the English education for the effective oral communication. However, the study in this field is fairly small (Oxford 1996), and it is important to understand the actual affective condition of the learners first: how the learners feel in the actual oral communication tasks. Otherwise, it is difficult to investigate effective learning and teaching to boost students' confidence in the oral communication. Therefore, this research was conducted to investigate the affective factors of Japanese EFL learners, especially the relationship between the oral communication proficiency and affective factors of the learners in the easy and the difficult oral communication tasks.

## **2. Literature Review**

The influence of affective factors on how well a foreign language is acquired has been discussed by a number of writers in the field. Krashen (1985) and his associates, for example, advance the notion of an 'affective filter', those 'affective factors' that screen out certain parts of learners' language environments' (Dulay et al., 1982:46). This means that the amount of linguistic input learners receive can be reduced by such factors as low motivation, which in turn may adversely affect their acquisition of the target language.

Self-esteem is one of the primary affective elements (Oxford 1996). It is a self-judgment of worth or value, based on a feeling of efficacy—a sense of interacting effectively with one's own environment. Learners with high self-esteem maintain positive evaluations of themselves (Tesser & Campbell, 1982, in, 1988). Amber (in Tyacke & Mendelsohn, 1986) found that unsuccessful language learners had lower self-esteem than successful language learners. Similarly, investigations into the personality of the so-called 'good language learner' have suggested that one of the important traits for successful language learning is a risk-taking. The relationship is generally held to be a positive one (Beebe, 1983; Ely, 1986), particularly in the area of oral work. Beebe argues that good

language learners extend their competence by taking a risk in listening to and using language which is beyond their present proficiency.

On the other hand, the role of anxiety, an affective response to language learning which may be seen as the opposite of high self-esteem and a willingness to take risks, is argued. Studies have tended to examine the relationship between language performance and either *trait anxiety* (where anxiousness is an inherent aspect of the personality which is exhibited in a variety of situations) and *state anxiety* (where anxiousness is a reaction to specific situations only, such as test-taking or oral work). The results of such studies are often conflicting, some, for example, suggesting an inverse relationship between trait anxiety and aspects of language performance (e.g. Swain & Burnaby, 1976), others no relationship (Genesee & Hamayan, 1980). Such inconsistencies can be accounted for in part by a lack of uniformity in the type of learners studied, the research methodology employed and the definition of anxiety adopted. The link, however, does seem to be stronger in the case of state anxiety (also referred to more specifically as *language anxiety*). Here, the relationship with achievement is generally an inverse one (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Horwitz, 1991; Phillips, 1992), although as Phillips points out, the correlation is usually a modest though not significant one.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Hypotheses

Based on the above studies, two hypotheses were made.

Hypothesis 1: The successful learners show higher ‘self-esteem’ in the oral task than the less successful learners.

Hypothesis 2: The successful learners show less ‘anxiety’ in the oral task than the less successful learners.

The ‘successful learners’ means the learners with high oral communication proficiency (see Table 2, Group 3) and the ‘less successful learners’, those with the low proficiency (see Table 2, Group 1) in this research. ‘Self-esteem’ refers to the degree to which individuals feel confident and it is manifested at different levels (global, situational, and task) (Heyde 1979; Gardener and Lambert 1972). In this research it was examined at the level of task. ‘High self-esteem’ was investigated by the ‘positive statements’ made by

the learners before, during, and after the performance, as well as ‘risk taking’ attitude, pushing oneself to take risks in a language learning situation, even though there is a chance of making a mistake or looking foolish (Oxford 1996). ‘Anxiety’ in this study means *state anxiety* or *language anxiety* and they are worries, self-doubt, frustration, helplessness, insecurity, fear and physical symptoms felt in the language learning.

### 3.2. Subjects

The sample in this research is sophomore female students of two different classes majoring in English at a junior college. The population of the sample is 75 in the first task and 64 in the second task, and they were divided into three proficiency groups to see the clear differences in the results of the successful and less successful learners.

### 3.3. Tasks

Two pair-work activities were tried. Task 1 was relatively easy and Task 2 was an unfamiliar and difficult one for the learners.

#### **Task 1: Conversation in the restaurant made by two learners**

This task was taken as a style of test to see if they acquired conversation patterns and formulaic expressions in various situations at the restaurant and they were told to prepare for this test the previous week. They made a pair for the test and were given 10 minutes to prepare together for a conversation between a waitress and a customer and actual production of conversation at the restaurant was recorded on a tape.

#### **Task 2: Interview a partner to find out her personality and report it in a short speech style**

This is a personal information exchange activity. Students made a pair and interviewed each other for about 5 minutes to find out their partners’ personalities and were given 10 minutes to prepare the report (speech) and record a speech on tape.

In the table below, characteristic points of the two tasks are summarized to get a clear idea of differences and similarities of them.

**Table 1. Comparisons between Task 1 and 2**

	Term of Lesson	Teacher's expectation to the lesson preparation	Purpose of the task	Type of activity	Style of Production
<b>Task 1</b>	Long-term	Memorizing conversation pattern at the restaurant in the different situation	To make conversation at the restaurant by using what they learned	Pair-work throughout the task	Collaborative
<b>Task 2</b>	Short-term	Study vocabulary of personality and prepare interview questions	To be able to analyze the responses of interviewing and use appropriate vocabulary to express the partner's personality	Pair-work (Interviewing) Individual work (Reporting)	Individual

### 3.4. Data Collection

#### 3.4.1. Oral communication proficiency test

An oral communication proficiency test was given to divide the sample into three proficiency groups. It was measured as follows. Students were asked to answer 5 questions in English concerning themselves and their families and all responses were recorded into the audio cassette tapes for the evaluation. They were graded in three categories (Section 1: Responsiveness, organization, length, Section 2: Fluency, pronunciation, intonation, rhythm, Section 3: Vocabulary, grammar, word usage), and each section was scored from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) and the total is from 3 to 15. Two raters evaluated the proficiency test. Reliability between the two raters was  $P=0.953$  and it was found to be reliable.

Based on the above graded score, the sample was divided into three groups; low proficiency or less successful learners (score 3 – 7.33 ), middle proficiency learners (7.67 – 10.33), and high proficiency or successful learners (10.67 – 15). Table 2 below shows the result of the oral communication proficiency test, and chi-square figure shows that there are significant differences ( $X^2=0.0001$ ) among the three groups.

**Table 2. Oral Communication Proficiency of Students**

	N	Mean	Mode	S.D.
<b>Total</b>	75	8.89	9	3.217
<b>Group 1</b>	25	5.32	3	1.428
<b>Group 2</b>	25	8.77	9	.902
<b>Group 3</b>	25	12.59	13	1.245
<b>Kruskal Wallis Test among three groups</b>				
<b>Chi-Square</b>	<b>Df</b>		<b>Asymptotic Sig.</b>	
65.108	2		.0001	

\*:P&lt;0.05    \*\*:P&lt;0.01

### 3.4.2. Affective factor data collection procedure

Students were asked to report introspectively what they thought and how they felt before, in the middle, and after the task. In this way, a total of 75 (Task 1) and 64 (Task 2) retrospective reports, and responses to questionnaire sheet were collected. They were carefully read, and students' remarks that revealed affective factors were underlined and excerpted, and frequencies were counted. The results are shown in the next chapter.

## 4. Results

As discussed in the introduction, the chief focus in this research is on 'self-esteem' and 'anxiety' as well as concepts of 'risk-taking' attitude. 'Self-esteem' can be referred to 'risk-taking' and 'making positive statements'. First of all, responses to show the affective factors are picked up and they are organized according to the classification of *affective* factor: 'Taking risks wisely', 'Making positive statement', and 'Anxiety' and 'Low evaluation'. For example, a response, 'Drew in own knowledge and experience', reported by a student in Task 1 and a response, 'Used the new words of expressing personality', in Task 2 are categorized into 'Taking risks wisely'. And the mean of Group 1 (less successful learners) and Group 3 (successful learners) were tested by Mann-Whitney U Test to see if there is a significant difference in the attitudes between the two groups, and the test result shows significant difference between them in both tasks. Responses of 'Making positive statement', 'Low evaluation' and 'Anxiety' were statistically tested.

Table 3. Students' responses in the two tasks by three proficiency groups

N=75 (Task 1) N=64 (Task2)

Affective Factor	Task	Learners' Response	Mean			Mann-Whitney U Test result	
			G1	G2	G3	Asymptotic Sig.	
						G1&G3	
						Individual response	Affective factor
Taking risks wisely	1	Drew in own knowledge and experience	.28	.60	.68	.005**	.005**
	2	Used the new words and expressions to describe personality	2.29	2.50	3.39	.012*	.012*
Making positive statement	1	Encouraged each other, saying 'Mistake is OK'.	.72	.72	.84	.311	.462
		We did well	.44	.68	.60	.262	
		Enjoyed working together	.80	.96	.80	.1	
		Learned more by pair work	.80	.84	.68	.338	
		I'm confident that I can use learned conversation patterns in the actual conversation next time.	.76	.84	.92	.127	
	2	I did well	.24	.14	.1	.220	.389
		Enjoyed working together	.33	.50	.62	.067	
		Will try harder next time	.24	.14	.19	.710	
		Want to know more good expressions	.05	.05	.10	.554	
		Asked for correction	.05	.05	.10	.554	
		Learned vocabulary well in the task	.24	.59	.67	.006**	
Law evaluation	2	Poor speaking	0	.14	.19	.741	.006**
		Poor accent and pronunciation	0	.09	.38	.002**	
		My voice is weak	0	.05	.19	.038*	
		Unsatisfied with the poor vocabulary	.05	.14	.33	.020*	
		Poor summary and organization	.05	.09	0	.317	
		No cohesive in summary	0	.05	0	.1	
		Difficult to understand my speech	.19	.14	.19	.741	
		Difficult to ask good questions	.10	.09	.19	.607	
		Difficult to understand long questions	.10	.09	.19	.607	
Anxiety	1	Felt tension before the activity	1	1	1	1	1
	2	Worried if I could do well before I started	1	1	1	1	.384
		Felt Anxious about the result after the task	.10	.18	.19	.384	

\*:P&lt;0.05 \*\*:P&lt;0.01

This table disclosed the following points.

1. The learners used a strategy, 'Taking risks wisely', in both tasks, and the test results showed significant differences between the less successful learners and successful learners.
2. The learners made a variety of 'Positive statements' in both tasks, and in both tasks statistical results did not show significant differences except for 'Learned vocabulary in the task' in Task 2, which shows a significant difference ( $X^2=0.006$ ) between the successful and less successful groups.
3. The most popularly reported response in 'Making positive statement' in Task 1 was 'Learned more by pair-work' followed by 'I'm confident that I can use learned conversation patterns in the actual conversation next time'.
4. The most popularly reported response 'Making positive statement' in Task 2 was 'Learned vocabulary in the task' followed by 'Enjoyed working together'.
5. The learners made negative response or 'Low evaluation' only in Task 2 and it showed a significant difference ( $X^2=0.006$ ) between the successful and less successful groups.
6. The learners felt some kind of 'Anxiety' before starting the activity in both tasks, but in Task 2, they felt anxiety after completing the task, too.
7. The learners expressed more negative feelings or 'low self-evaluation' in Task 2 than in Task 1.

'Self-esteem' consists of two affective factors ('Taking risks wisely' and 'Making positive statements'), therefore, both factors need to show significant differences in the statistical test. 'Taking risks' showed a significant difference between the two proficiency groups, however, 'making positive statements' did not. Therefore, hypothesis 1 (The successful learners show more high 'self-esteem' in the oral task than the less successful learners) was rejected. The successful learners 'took risks' more than less successful learners, however, both the successful and the less successful learners showed the same degree of attitude of 'Making positive statements'. The above table also showed that Hypothesis 2 (The successful learners show less 'anxiety' in the oral task than the less successful learners) was rejected. Therefore, two hypotheses were rejected. In conclusion, the successful learners do not necessarily hold higher 'self-esteem' and they show more 'anxiety' than the less successful ones in the oral communication tasks.



Moreover, many negative responses which show 'low evaluation' were collected in Task 2, and interestingly, more by the high proficiency learners than the lower proficiency learners. On the other hand, 'Enjoyed working together' and 'Learned well by the task or pair-task' showed high frequency in the both tasks in the three proficiency groups.

In Table 4, the above responses were further analyzed statistically by T-Test to see if there were significant differences in their attitudes between the two tasks, in other words, between the easy and difficult tasks. The mean of main affective factors (Taking risks wisely, Making positive statement, and Anxiety) and three responses of 'High evaluation', 'Enjoyed task' and 'Learned by the task' were tested.

**Table 4 T-Test of affective factors between Task 1 and Task 2**

N=75 (Task 1) N=64 (Task2)

	Taking risks wisely		Making positive statement		Anxiety		High evaluation (Did well)		Enjoyed task		Learned by the task	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
Mean	.52	2.73	2.88	.84	1	1.15	.57	.16	.85	.48	.77	.50
Asymptotic Sig.	.013*		.006**		.031*		.061		.60		.228	

\*:P<0.05 \*\*P<0.01

Table 4 shows that the three major affective factors showed significant differences in the affective responses between Task 1 and Task 2, or easy task and difficult task; 'Taking risks wisely' ( $X^2=0.013$ ), 'Making positive statement' ( $X^2=0.006$ ), 'Anxiety' ( $X^2=0.031$ ). However, 'High evaluation', 'Enjoyed task', and 'Learned by the task' did not show significant differences.

The results of Table 3 and 4 would be summarized as below:

1. The successful learners take significantly more risks than the less successful ones and significantly more in the difficult task than the easy one.
2. The learners make significantly more positive statements in the easy task than the difficult one, and there is not a significant difference between the successful and less successful learners.
3. The learners usually feel some anxiety in any oral communication task, and they express more anxiety in the difficult task than the easy one.
4. The successful learners evaluate themselves low in both easy and difficult tasks.

5. Many learners like the pair-work and communicative task.
6. In the communicative oral task, many of the learners felt learned well, but in the difficult task, the degree of 'learned well' of the successful learners was stronger than that of the less successful learners.

As the conclusion, in the oral communication task, the successful learners generally tend to take risks more than the less successful learners, but they do not necessarily show higher 'self-esteem' than the less successful ones. Besides, they usually evaluate themselves low and show much 'anxiety'. However, they enjoy pair-work and communicative tasks and value them high as the good means of language learning.

## **5. Discussion**

In this chapter, discussions were focussed on two points. One is a contradictory relationship between 'self-esteem' and 'anxiety' found in the study. The other is the role of pair-work, and communicative oral tasks.

The results of this research were quite different from the expected one. The successful learners did not necessarily show higher 'self-esteem' than the less successful learners, and they also showed as much 'anxiety' as less successful ones did. On the other hand, they 'took risks wisely' significantly more than the less successful learners. This is a very contradictory attitude compared with the results of the previous study. It is believed that the role of anxiety may be seen as the opposite of high self-esteem and a willingness to take risks (Suzanne1997). Yet some writers suggest that anxiety does not necessarily have a negative effect on language learning and performance, but may be of a 'facilitating' as well as of a 'debilitating' nature.

Facilitating anxiety motivates the learner to 'fight' the new learning task.

Debilitating anxiety, in contrast, motivates the learner to 'flee' the new learning task; it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behavior.

(Scovel, 1978:139)

The successful learners in this research seemed to fight the new learning task, especially so in Task 2, which was an unfamiliar and difficult task, and took a more risk-taking attitude. Therefore, anxiety had an good effect on the successful learners.

Other research (Knapman 1982) into anxiety in general suggests that girls are particularly prone to worries about peer-group evaluation. Since all the subjects in this research are girls, it could be the case. On the other hand, Phillips (1992:19) points out that it is not merely weaker students who suffer from the effects of anxiety; in her study of anxiety and oral test performance she found that the students of highest ability demonstrated 'the most dramatic example of language, if not nervous breakdown' during oral examinations. Such students, although achieving highly, seem to do so at the expense of their emotional well-being.

Now it is important to think about this issue from the cultural perspective, too. Japanese are taught 'modesty' as a good virtue. The more you are educated, the more you are supposed to be modest and humble. Therefore, it is not deniable that this tendency was reflected in their response or self-evaluation. A strong risk-taking attitude is a good proof that they are motivated but not overly esteemed. Self-esteem is one of the primary affective elements, however, it should be noted that high self-esteem students often tend to evaluate themselves inaccurately (Tesser & Campbell, 1982, in, 1988) and exaggerate their competence or adequacy (Harter, 1985). However, the successful learners in this research seemed to have judged themselves fairly and accurately, although their evaluation could be a little bit too low in Task 2.

The statistical results in the both tasks also showed that the learners enjoyed the task and learned well. Therefore, it is meaningful to think about the role of pair-work and cooperative tasks. According to Oxford (1996), cooperative learning consistently shows the following significant effects: higher self-esteem; increased confidence and enjoyment; greater and more rapid achievement.

Many other researchers (Sharan et al., 1985; Bejarano, 1987; Gunderson and Johnson, 1980; Bassano and Christison, 1988; Wong Fillmore 1985; Gaies, 1985; and Seliger, 1983) admitted that cooperative strategies in the language learning have accrued the following advantages: better student and teacher satisfaction, stronger language learning motivation, more language practice opportunities, more feedback about language errors, and greater use of different language functions.

However, cooperative strategies might not be second nature to all language learners. Research shows that on their own, with no special training or encouragement, language learners do not typically report a natural preference for cooperative strategies (Reid, 1987; O'Malley et al., 1985a). However, this might differ by sex, since females show a more cooperative social orientation than do males (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Gilligan, 1982;

Bardwick, 1971).

## 6. Conclusion and Future Implication

A strategy 'Taking risks wisely', which is a very important strategy in language development, was employed significantly more by the successful learners than less successful learners and more significantly in the unfamiliar and difficult task. The data of risk-taking attitude are a reflection of what they actually did, therefore, it can be concluded that the successful learners are risk-taker in the oral communication tasks. On the other hand, data of 'positive statement' and 'anxiety' are the reflection of their thinking and feeling, therefore, they are sometimes deceitful. For example, 'Positive statement' was made generally by all proficiency levels of learners, and expressed more significantly in the easy task. 'Anxiety' was expressed by everybody in both the easy and difficult tasks, and significantly more in the difficult task. The results of more positive statement in the easy task and more anxiety in the difficult task are understandable, however, little 'positive statement' and much 'anxiety' of the successful learners do not agree with that of the previous research. Now two aspects should be taken into consideration to interpret this. One is the cultural aspect of Japanese students that they are very modest in evaluating themselves and the other is an aspect of women that they are generally too worried. However, it seems from the data that the high proficiency learners had optimal anxiety and esteem to perform the tasks well.

Other important findings in this research are that the successful learners seemed to have used anxiety positively and pair-work seemed to have had a good effect on their learning. Therefore, pair-work and cooperative learning should be introduced in the language class more positively. That way, teachers can exert a tremendous influence over the emotional atmosphere of the classroom in three different ways: by changing the social structure of the classroom to give students more responsibility, by providing increased amounts of naturalistic communication, and by teaching learners to use affective strategies. When students take more responsibility in their learning through cooperative work, more learning occurs, and both teachers and learners feel more successful.

However, this study has limitation in the sense that subjects are only junior college students and all girls of English major. Future research is needed to see if the same results would be gained from the different sample; for example, from four year university students or high school students; male students, different major students like economics,

law, business, science, etc., or from different English levels. It is worth investigating and should be interesting.

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