

# **A study of foreign language anxiety in student teachers in Mexico and Japan**

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper discusses the levels of anxiety of student teachers who teach English in their teaching practices in Mexico and in Japan. As Horwitz (1986) states, “Teachers and students generally feel strongly that anxiety is a major obstacle to be overcome in learning to speak another language.” This is true not only for the students in the classroom, but also for teachers of non-native speakers of English. As globalization advances, it is an almost universal phenomenon that national governments promote policies that require the younger generation to develop the necessary English competencies to face the communication challenges of the globalized world. With this background in mind, English teachers experience great pressure to use the target language in teaching classes so that students will receive adequate exposure to the language. In the case of student teachers, who are developing their English and their teaching skills, it is not hard to imagine that they would face even more pressure. They must struggle to face the challenge of teaching something that they are not perfectly familiar with. The main question is: Are there cultural differences in the level of anxiety of student teachers who are facing this challenge? The authors, who come from two different countries, researched two different groups of student teachers, one in Mexico and one in Japan, to ascertain the level of foreign language anxiety that pre-service English teachers experience.

## **2. Foreign Language Anxiety**

Foreign language anxiety is defined as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language-learning process” (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 128). Language anxiety derives from three sources: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation by others, and test anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Empirical studies conducted with students in foreign language classes (Philips, 1992; Young, 1991; Aida, 1994) suggest that the negative effects of foreign language anxiety are seen in the students’ speaking performance.

### **2.1 Teachers’ Foreign Language Anxiety**

Few studies have addressed the foreign language anxiety of non-native teachers since they are often not categorized as learners. However, even if they are non-native teachers of a foreign language, it can be said that they are continuing to learn the target language. In a sense, these foreign language teachers are full-fledged advanced learners with teaching skills. The teachers’ foreign language anxiety is usually caused by the fear of others’ negative evaluation.

Additionally, professional requirements and the awareness of having to be an expert speaker of English and an input provider inevitably heighten the levels of foreign language anxiety. Anxiety about speaking can be a significant impediment for teachers to face since different situations require them to be flexible users of English without preparation and reflection.

Foreign language anxiety is commonly observed even among experienced English teachers. One of the authors, Arao, conducted research by means of interviews with 11 Japanese junior and senior high school English teachers who had been teaching

English for more than 10 years. The interviews revealed that these English teachers experienced foreign language anxiety, to a greater or lesser extent, when speaking English in class, although the anxiety levels varied and apprehension did not necessarily impede effective teaching. Even the most experienced Japanese teacher of English, Ms. A., who has been teaching for 24 years in a Japanese junior high school, stated the following:

“I’m O.K. when I use classroom English and explain things in the textbooks in English. I’m very used to doing it now and I can do it well enough to teach my class, although I couldn’t do it when I started teaching. I don’t feel any anxieties about it. If anything, I just can’t spontaneously respond to something incidental. As you know, it is important to interact with a student, such as giving a witty comment to a student’s tweeting and making a joke of it during class. I sometimes don’t know what to say in English, so I naturally switch my language to Japanese and get through the situation. It’s not a big problem but I wish I could do it in English.” (Ms. A., in an oral interview in September 2016).

As seen by her interview, it can be challenging if Ms. A. attempts to speak only in English, even though it is not an actual requirement in all class situations.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) classify anxiety into three categories. The first category is “trait anxiety,” a stable characteristic often seen in nervous individuals. The second is “state anxiety,” in which uncomfortable, anxious feelings occur at a certain moment in a specific situation. The third is “situation specific anxiety,” which develops during several occurrences of momentary discomfort, or state anxiety. Foreign language anxiety is an example of situation specific anxiety. In the case of non-native teachers of English, the specific situation takes place during their teaching, when they find it difficult to use English to adapt to unexpected extemporaneous incidents, such as the statements, behaviors, and reactions of their students. Although

even experienced teachers cannot anticipate everything that may happen in the classroom, they have learned to handle these situations in English. As a result, their level of foreign language anxiety is low enough to give them positive feelings. It is well said that "Experience is the best teacher." It is natural for pre-service teachers, who have limited teaching experience, to suffer from foreign language anxiety.

## **2.2. Cultural Backgrounds**

Speaking plays different roles in different cultures. Foreign language anxiety is mostly observed in speaking (Young, 1991). Except when delivering a scripted speech, speaking usually requires the speakers to produce statements spontaneously within a limited time frame, without thinking or monitoring the language. Production skill is obvious and instantly reveals the level of language skill. Although writing is also a production skill, there is time for users to check their use of language.

In multicultural classrooms, it is not uncommon to see students from some cultures take turns in class and give their ideas and opinions forcefully, whereas students from other cultures never express their ideas and opinions, staying silent and only listening. Since cultural attitudes about speaking may influence foreign language anxiety, it is important to explore the cultural backgrounds of the learners.

## **2.3 Speaking in Japanese Culture**

When the problem of the speaking skills of Japanese students is discussed, Japanese culture is often mentioned as one of the reasons that prevents them from taking a risk when speaking English. Regardless of which language is used, Japanese people generally have restrained feelings about expressing themselves orally and saying whatever is on their minds. Many words can seem rude and, in some cases, even risky. The culture is so deeply rooted that people are unaware of it in everyday

life. The culture originates from a variety of factors intrinsic to Japanese society. The Buddhist, especially Zen, ideal points profoundly to the desire for silence. Understanding others without words is an ideal communication. Since the goal is to realize the emptiness of words, the words themselves are underestimated in communication. Not many Japanese people are aware that they follow this teaching in everyday communication, but as they grow up they adapt to the cultural habits and learn to respond to cultural expectations.

Regarding ideal communication, harmony among people is emphasized in the Japanese group-oriented society; a person is expected to speak for the sake of the whole group, not oneself. To achieve the goal of ideal communication, one elaborately chooses words to speak and avoids direct expression.

These are just a few of the examples that illustrate the Japanese attitudes about speaking. The ideal cultural communication is based on historic, geographic, and social backgrounds that influence Japanese modern society, no matter how much globalization may advance.

## **2.4 English Classes in Japan**

According to MEXT (2009), the guideline for senior high school English courses that was implemented in 2013, English teachers teach their classes using mostly English. Before, many English teachers used Japanese when necessary or some taught their classes entirely in Japanese except when they read English sentences and passages from textbooks. The aim of this policy is to provide students with opportunities to use English in the classroom. A survey of MEXT (2017) shows that in 2016, 45% of senior high school English teachers used English to teach their English classes (11% used English for more than 75% of their speaking and 34% used English for 50% - 75% of their speaking). As for junior high school English classes, the use of

English is not a requirement in 2018, but a guideline published by MEXT (2017) stipulates that English teachers must teach their English classes in English by 2021. The MEXT (2017) shows that in 2016, 64.3% of junior high English teachers taught Year 1 English classes in English, 63.2% in Year 2 and 61.9% in Year 3. The rates have been increasing for the past four years in both junior and senior high schools, so the rate is expected to continue to grow. This means that pre-service teachers need to be prepared to meet the policy's expectations and changes by improving their speaking and teaching skills in English classes.

## **2.5 Speaking in Mexican Culture**

While Japanese students tend to remain quiet and think to convey their ideas in English, their Mexican counterparts are likely to speak without considering their pronunciation or the accuracy of their ideas. It is widely known in Mexican society that parents encourage and motivate their children to express their ideas. Even in the classroom, teachers frequently ask students what they think about their classes. This is a way of expressing their individuality and an important way to enrich the class. Speaking one's own ideas is greatly encouraged and promoted by society.

## **2.6 English Classes in Mexico**

In 2012, the Secretariat of Public Education in Mexico proposed the policy that one of the fundamental objectives to be achieved by 2020 was "to raise the quality of education so that students improve their level of educational achievement and have a means of accessing a greater status of well-being." At the same time it acknowledges the necessity to incorporate English into the preschool and elementary curriculum, as well as to make suitable adjustments to the English subject curriculum in the secondary schools, with the aim of advancing the teaching of English in all three levels

of Basic Education. It is expected that students will have developed the necessary competencies to successfully face the communication challenges of the globalized world by the time they complete their secondary education.

To perform the actions to enable the advancement of teaching English, the Secretariat of Public Education has implemented the National English Program in Basic Education (NEPBE) from which syllabuses for the three levels of Basic Education are derived. These syllabuses are developed based on the standardization of national and international standards, as well as the selection of criteria for teacher training and the certification of English Language proficiency. The curriculum is designed for the students to advance from the A0 “beginner” level to the B2 “independent user” level (equivalent to the First Certificate level) of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scale.

The design and implementation of the new program requires teachers to achieve this new goal and to have knowledge of the language. According to the Programa Nacional de Inglés para Educación Básica (PNIEB) (2008), teachers should be able to understand the process of second language acquisition, as well as know the structure of the foreign language, and have the capacity to organize and develop collaborative work. New teachers need to learn about the characteristics and needs of teenagers and to develop effective ways to teach a foreign language. In the end, a large part of the success of the PNIEB or NEPBE will depend on the teacher.

Using the target language in the classroom has long been emphasized in teaching English in Mexico. Teaching the language by using the target language in the classroom is regarded as essential because it uses authentic language for communication. Since teachers are the key persons who manage learning in the classroom, they play an important role as models of the language. Therefore, there is a great deal of pressure on English teachers in Mexico; they are anxious about using English in the classroom, just as their students have foreign language anxiety.

### **3. Pre-service Teachers of English in Japan and Mexico**

In order to be certified to teach English in Japan, students are required to take courses to develop their English skills and to enhance their professional knowledge of English, British and American literature, linguistics, intercultural understanding and methodologies of teaching English. In addition to these compulsory courses, a teaching practice course is required. Depending on the curriculum, the teaching practice varies from three to four weeks, though the number of classes pre-service teachers must teach is not officially prescribed. In the course that the author, Arao, teaches for example, students conduct their practice teaching for four weeks at the connected junior high school or at a local school. They observe the classes of their peer student teachers and the in-service teachers to learn teaching techniques, skills and ways to manage the class. The student teachers write class plans and teach a number of classes. They are given advice on how to conduct a class, including the use of the whiteboard, word cards, giving directions, interacting with the students, time management, and English skills. The student teachers are expected to use English effectively and as often as possible to provide learners with high-quality English input, and to explain things in a simplified and easily understood English. However, many student teachers face a challenge because of their lack of English speaking ability, teaching technique, experience, and confidence in the classroom.

In Mexico, two requirements must be met to be certified as an English teacher: 1) fulfill all the credits for the compulsory courses and 2) obtain a certification of English language proficiency in level B2 of the CEFR.

To accomplish the first requirement, pre-service teachers must complete four years at a Normal School (a university for teachers), where they take courses such as second language learning, phonology, a comparison of English and Spanish grammar, lesson planning design, and teaching English to adolescents in semester 8. During semesters 3



through 6, trainee teachers are required to complete a one-week practice teaching. At this point the trainees begin to design lesson plans, select materials, and are observed by a professor from the Normal School. During semesters 7 and 8, they undergo training for six months at a secondary school and six months at the Normal School. Students teach twelve hours a week during a four-week period. During this time, they are accompanied by a head English teacher at the secondary school and a tutor from the Normal School. Both observe the 50-minute lessons and give feedback to the trainees by checking the lesson plans and the materials they have designed.

To accomplish the second requirement, students are required to study English outside the Normal School from Semesters 1 through 8 to obtain the B2 certification. Since all pre-service teachers are learning English when they teach it as student teachers, problems often arise with their pronunciation of English, their coherence, and their confidence in English skills.

#### **4. Study**

This study compares the level of foreign language anxiety of Mexican student teachers and their Japanese counterparts to determine whether their English-speaking anxiety in teaching is influenced by different cultures. Although foreign language anxiety has been studied and is regarded as a common problem among foreign language learners, the degree of anxiety has not been measured, which has left the evaluation to be based on personal differences. Acknowledging that personal factors contribute to different levels of foreign language anxiety, this study seeks to determine whether or not a student teacher's foreign language anxiety in class is culturally specific. Hence, English pre-service student teachers in Mexico and Japan were studied with regard to their foreign language anxiety.

#### **4.1 Procedure**

The Mexican subjects of the research were 15 fourth-year English major students (in their eighth semester), aged between 20 and 21, at the Escuela Normal de Amecameca. They studied English in Mexico and had completed their required practice teaching. They were provided with a questionnaire to be answered by email.

The Japanese subjects were 13 third-year students (in their sixth semester) who had finished their four-week teaching practice just before the beginning of the sixth semester. They received a printed copy of the same questionnaire as the Mexican students at the end of a debriefing meeting held one month after the teaching practice.

The five-point scale questionnaire used in this study was adapted and modified from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), designed by Horwitz et al. (1986) for assessing student anxiety in English classes, and consisting of 21 items (see Appendix). The scores in Items 5, 7, 12, 17, and 20 were reversed to calculate the total scores of anxiety levels. A t-test was conducted to compare the two groups of student teachers in Mexico and Japan.

#### **4.2 The Results of study**

The results of the t-test revealed that there was no significant difference in the total of foreign language anxiety of pre-service teachers in Mexico and Japan. ( $t=-0.95$ ,  $p=0.35$ ). Both Mexican and Japanese student teachers experienced approximately the same level of anxiety—39.16 for the Mexican student teachers and 37.42 for the Japanese ones.

### **4.3 Discussion**

Foreign language anxiety among student teachers is not a cultural-specific phenomenon as far as the Mexican and Japanese cultures are concerned. It appears that the two cultural attitudes toward speaking display some differences that may possibly influence the student teachers' foreign language anxiety. However, the difference was not significant and student teachers of both cultures exhibited a certain level of foreign language anxiety after their practice teaching. Regardless of their cultural attitudes, speaking English in class as a student teacher is an immense challenge that threatens their self-esteem and their identities as future professional English teachers.

### **5. Conclusion**

Foreign language anxiety is inherent in teaching professionals, regardless of their cultural tendencies and attitudes about speaking. Since it is clear that there is no cultural difference in the foreign language anxiety of Mexican and Japanese pre-service teachers, any means to ease the anxiety should be considered during the pre-service teachers' training. Encouraging them to practice and to use English in their classes, such as, "Let's try to speak more English. Be confident," is common in teacher training and may be easier said than done. How might they overcome their foreign language anxiety?

First, pre-service teachers obviously need to improve their English-speaking skills to gain enough confidence to overcome their anxiety. They need a natural communicative situation where they use English in everyday life, even outside classrooms, to have a sense that English is one of their tools for self-expression. For example, in Mexico it is recommended that pre-service teachers make an effort to converse in English with their peer pre-service teachers, which helps them view English as something natural and not something special for teaching. Accuracy is very

important in their English because they play important roles as input for students. However, first, pre-service teachers can start their efforts in speaking English to achieve fluency. That will help them gain confidence and accuracy is expected to follow.

Second, pre-service teachers should keep the notion of “teacher talk” in mind rather than being anxious about their fluency and accuracy in English. For example, in Japan, some English teachers pay so much attention to the policy of speaking English in class that they are likely to forget the original goal, which is to speak as much English as possible for the sake of students. One thing to remember is that English should be spoken in order for students to have ample comprehensible input of the language and be encouraged to speak it. Therefore, the teaching training for pre-service teachers should emphasize the practice of teacher talk adjusted for speed, clarity and difficulty to deliver effective learning methods for the students. Teacher talk is very important for students as a quality input. These professional skills can be attained only with practice as a language teacher. Pre-service teachers should be aware that their final goal is not to be good English speakers but to be good English teachers with teacher talk skills. Their English does not necessarily sound like that of a native speaker.

Since this study was made up of only two different groups of pre-service teachers from Mexico and Japan, different results could occur in further studies of different cultural groups. However, it is obvious that the levels of foreign language anxiety of student teachers is not a matter of cultural attitude or shyness; it is deep-rooted and closely related to professional beliefs and the developmental stage of a pre-service teacher. It is critical to understand the foreign language anxiety of pre-service teachers and to develop measures to assist them during their teacher training.

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## Appendix

Questionnaire.

(Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

1. I often feel uncomfortable to speak English, even though I majored it.
2. I sometimes feel it is difficult to speak English in front of students in class.
3. I feel anxiety of making any mistake in front of students in class.
4. I am thinking too much of not making any mistakes while speaking English.
5. I feel confident when I speak English to teach a lesson.
6. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English at my class.
7. I don't worry about making mistakes in the classroom
8. I don't understand why some people get upset over English classes.
9. I always feel that the other pre-service teachers speak English better than I do.
10. I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of the others.
11. If I may teach English in L1, I think I can do better.
12. I think making mistakes is a part of learning process.
13. English teachers who are no native should have a perfect pronunciation just as native speakers.
14. Teachers should never make mistake while teaching. They should be perfect
15. I am conscious about my mistakes made in class, after the class.
16. When I face teaching an English class, I feel nervous.
17. When I speak English, I try to overcome such feeling of anxiety.
18. When I speak English, I think my English should be perfect.
19. I worry when I give consultations to my students in English.
20. I don't feel a pressure to prepare very well for my English class.
21. When I am on my way to my English class, I feel very sure and relaxed.