The Effect of Anxiety on Oral Communication Skills

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This paper investigates the impact of interaction with native speaker (NS) on the development of anxiety and oral communication skills when the foreign language (FL) learner has an opportunity to interact regularly with NS in the community. Forty subjects, who were studying Japanese at an intermediate level at Griffith University, participated in the study. Each subject had a matched NS partner and met for ten hours during a semester outside the classroom. The subjects completed questionnaires on anxiety measures and took speaking and listening tests before and after the ten-hour interaction. The effect of interaction with NS was examined by comparing the scores on the pre-, post-tests and questionnaires and written journals, which were collected after each meeting. The results showed that interaction with NS had a positive impact on reducing anxiety and improving oral communication skills. The present study has implications for FL teaching especially in developing oral communication skills.

Introduction

Many learners indicate that they are interested in developing speaking ability and list it as a primary goal for learning the language. This accords well with the currently accepted communicative language teaching approach. Under communicative language teaching approach, interaction, conversation, and language use are emphasised, rather than learning about the language (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). Thus, the means of assessing the linguistic competence tends to be based on performance rather than knowledge. In communicative language classes, student-to-student interaction in pair and small group work and student-centred activities are common practice, based on the belief that this practice will make language learning enjoyable and result in acquiring language skills necessary for communication. However, Savignon (1972) pointed out that this kind of practice in classrooms leaves some students in a particularly vulnerable position. For those who experience FL classroom anxiety, more practice in speaking, which is intended to facilitate oral competence, means increasing apprehension, which in turn reduces any enjoyment associated with the language learning experience (Phillips, 1991). Therefore, the current teaching practice and performance-based assessment which emphasises spontaneous oral production can be the most threatening experience for anxious students (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

Language learning anxiety has long been recognised by instructors and identified as having a negative impact on language learning. For the last thirty years, researchers have been investigating the language anxiety that learners experience when they engage in
learning a foreign and second language (FL/L2). A large amount of research has been conducted to identify the effect of anxiety on learners' language achievement and the source of anxiety, and to offer temporary solutions to mitigate anxiety. In her review on findings concerning anxiety and language achievement, Horwitz (2001) confirmed that there is a negative relationship between anxiety and achievement. Furthermore, many researchers have insisted that speaking in the target language is the most anxiety-provoking aspect of learning the language for learners (e.g., Aida, 1994; Bailey, 1983; Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999; Ely, 1986; Fukai, 2000; Horwitz et al., 1986; Kanagy & Futaba, 1994; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Madsen, Brown, & Jones, 1991; Saito-Abbott & Samimy, 1997; Young, 1990).

A major challenge for teaching a FL within the communicative language teaching curriculum therefore, is to develop students' oral communication skills while increasing confidence in using the target language (TL). However, for many FL learners, exposure to the TL is mainly limited in the classroom and they lack opportunities to use the TL with NSs outside the classroom as would normally occur in L2 environment. In order to address these problems, the researcher induced the learners to interact with NS partners outside the classroom (i.e., Community Involvement project) as a requirement for a language programme. This paper reports on a study that investigated the effects of 10-hour interaction with NS on the development of the students' oral communication skills and anxiety when they had regular interaction in the TL.

Background of the present study
Many language learners list speaking ability as one of their primary goals for studying the language (DEET, 1991; Zammit, 1993). However, it is said to be one of the most difficult skills to develop for learners especially whose language is taught only in the classroom (Schultz, 1986). Compared to those who have a constant exposure to the target language (TL) in second language (L2) environment, FL learners clearly have disadvantages in terms of opportunities to use the language. Moreover, the Japanese language will require more time for English speakers to learn to speak than cognate languages such as French, Spanish, and German (based on the Foreign Service Institute's estimation, Jorden & Lambert, 1991; Unger, Lorish, Noda, & Wada, 1993).

Anxiety in language learning
Many students who have experienced learning a FL have expressed how stressful it was to be in the classroom as it provoked anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Price, 1991). When learners experience moderate anxiety, they may skip classes, never volunteer, neglect to turn in homework, avoid speaking in class, respond in a barely audible whisper, or sit in the back of the classroom to minimise the humiliation or embarrassment of being called upon to speak (see Bailey, 1995; Cohen, 1997; Fukai, 2000; Horwitz et al., 1986; Phillips, 1991). Furthermore, when learners experience severe anxiety, it can be detrimental and the effect irreversible to them: they may be terrified of taking a language course, traumatised by unsuccessful performance and achievement, and consequently hate learning the language and choose not to study at all (Price, 1991).

In the last two decades or so, a large number of researchers from the field of language education and psychology have investigated the effects of anxiety on language
learning. The development of anxiety scales specific to FL learning, such as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and the French Class Anxiety Scale and the French Use Anxiety Scale, has certainly sparked interest in language anxiety research and the results using these measures have been consistent (Kitano, 1998, p. 36). In her recent review of literature on the relationship between language anxiety and achievement, Horwitz (2001) confirmed that there is "a consistent moderated negative relationship between anxiety and achievement" (p. 112). Researchers have identified the source of anxiety, and they have also offered some suggestions so that students' level of anxiety can be mitigated. To date, studies have shown that FL anxiety has been almost entirely associated with the oral aspects of language use (e.g., Aida, 1994; Bailey, 1983, 1995; Cheng et al., 1999; Ely, 1986; Fukai, 2000; Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz et al., 1986; Kanagy & Futaba, 1994; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Madsen et al., 1991; Saito-Abbott & Samimy, 1997; Young, 1990). The potential sources of anxiety suggested by these studies include: speaking in front of peers, fear of negative evaluation by peers and teacher (e.g., making mistakes), and language testing situations.

Horwitz et al. (1986), MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) asserted that FL anxiety is situation specific rather than a trait anxiety. It is a type of anxiety unique to classroom language learning and distinct from a general feeling of anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1991) defined FL anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 31). Horwitz et al. (1986) stressed that no other field of study (e.g., mathematics, science) implies self-concept and self-expression to the degree that language study does. The gap between what learners can do in their native language and FL leads to "reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic" (p. 128). In general, adult learners have mature thoughts and ideas where they rarely find it difficult to comprehend others or to make themselves understood in their native language. However, in a FL, they are often confronted with uncertain or even unknown linguistic and socio-cultural standards. This is "likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128).

In order to alleviate anxiety and help students to cope with language anxiety, most literature has concluded with similar suggestions. It has been suggested that teachers need to play a vital role by taking a lead in creating supportive and caring climate in the classroom and understanding about FL anxiety as well as providing assistance to the students, e.g., anxiety workshop, so they can deal with their anxieties. Some researchers have looked into different teaching approaches to help students cope with anxiety. For instance, more humanistic approaches, the Natural Approach (see Koch & Terrell, 1991) and Council-Learning or Community Language Learning (see Kayama, 1998; Samimy & Rardin, 1994) were introduced to the learners to examine whether they are effective in alleviating FL anxiety among students. Although more research is needed to determine how effective these methodologies are in relation to reducing anxiety, to date, it appears that they do not seem to address the problem significantly. What needs to be clarified first is: does alleviation of anxiety really change learners' willingness to speak in the classroom? If this does not occur, the chance of improving oral communication skills is slim. Thus, one needs to know what makes learners initiate communication in the TL.
Communication research (as a part of behavioural science) has focused on investigating what is involved in human communication. In communication research, the relationship between communication apprehension, willingness to communicate (WTC), perceived competence, and frequency of communication has been the centre of the investigation. MacIntyre and Clément (as cited in Baker & MacIntyre, 2003, p. 90) predicted that WTC is influenced not only by anxiety but also by perceived competence. Baker and MacIntyre (2003) stressed that it is not the individual's actual communication competence but their perceived communication competence which determines WTC (p. 71). This is because when learners perceive that they are not going to succeed in communicating, they are likely to choose not to talk, even though they can do well. These findings suggest that anxiety is closely associated with perceived competence (Baker & MacIntyre, 2003). Baker and MacIntyre (2003) proposed the notion of a "vicious cycle" of language learning. They postulated:

Those with higher anxiety and lower perceived competence likely will be less willing to communicate and thus avoid L2 communication. When people avoid these behaviours, they deprive themselves of the opportunity to improve their proficiency and experience. Without an improvement in proficiency, it is unlikely that the person will experience a reduction in anxiety or an increase in perceived competence (Baker & MacIntyre, 2003, p. 71).

**Linguistic and affective outcomes of interaction with NSs**

Despite the common view that interacting with NSs is valuable for learning a TL, there are few empirical studies that have investigated the effect of interaction with NS on FL learners. It has been reported that regular conversational interactions with NSs in the community were very beneficial to learners in terms of both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects (Eisenchlas & Hortiguera, 1999–2000; Imura, in press; Ingram, 1978a, 1978b, 1980; Kurtz & Luna, 1983; Stoller, Hodges, & Kimbrough, 1995).

Based on the observation of their students, Ingram (1980), Eisenchlas and Hortiguera (1999–2000), and Kurtz and Luna (1983) found a marked improvement in students' oral fluency and communicative competence when they had interaction with NSs. For example, Kurtz and Luna (1983) reported that their students' conversation skills had improved following as little as two 15-minute one-to-one free conversations over 10 weeks (i.e., 5 hours in total) with Spanish senior citizens. The students in Ingram (1980) self-rated the most improved areas as: confidence, ability to comprehend the spoken language and to speak, and range of vocabulary. The students in Stoller et al.'s (1995) study claimed that their fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and conversational strategies had improved when they had a minimum of 15 hours' conversation partner program during a semester.

Affective benefits of interaction with NSs have also been reported in the literature. Stoller et al. (1995) described how the emotional and psychological support that NSs had provided to learners facilitated their learning. The learners in the conversation partner program reported that they had made new (NS) friends to talk and go out with who could share happiness and depression (Stoller et al., 1995). Having their own NS partner, students' self-esteem improved because NSs were casual, friendly, encouraging and non-judgemental of students' performance and accepted them as whole human beings (Stoller et al., 1995). Thus, the special bond with NS and the learning environment created room
for the learners to converse voluntarily (Kurtz & Luna, 1983; Long, 1997). These changes in the beliefs and attitudes may transfer to classroom activities. For instance, Ingram (1978b, 1980) and Eisencha (1999–2000) noticed that their students were more willing to converse and participate (i.e., risk-taking) than they had previously been as a result of regular conversational interaction with NSs.

Drawing on the results of this research, it is expected that the students' listening and speaking skills will improve after the interaction with NSs. It is also predicted that anxiety in using Japanese will decrease and their perceived competence in speaking and listening Japanese will improve. Thus, students will feel confident in using Japanese when they are given opportunities to interact with NS partners and their oral communication skills will improve in some areas.

**Method**

**Design**

Changes in oral communication skills, anxiety, and perceived competence from Time 1 (prior to interacting with NS partner) to Time 2 (after completing 10-hour interaction with NS partner) were examined in a sample of Japanese learners at a university. The study was carried out over a period of 14 weeks during a semester.

**Participants**

Forty students who had enrolled in Intermediate Japanese Level 2 at Griffith University participated in the study. There were 28 females (70%) and 12 males (30%). They were between 18 and 42 years old with mean of 22.3. Most subjects were in either 2nd or 3rd year in the university programme. Twenty-seven students had studied Japanese at high school and all had studied at university for 1.7 years on average. The group comprised of 4 nationalities: 23 Australians; 1 New Zealander; 13 Taiwanese; and 3 of Hong Kong origin. The majority of the students had never been to Japan (37.5%) or had spent a short time in Japan (42.3%) and some had spent more than 6 months in Japan (20%). As for NSs, forty-four assisted by meeting regularly with the students throughout a semester for the study. The NS population varied in age, the makeup of their family and their residence status in Australia. The population of Japanese NSs consisted of permanent residents or temporary visitors to Australia for study, work, and working holiday purposes.

**Instruments**

**Anxiety**

The learners' anxiety felt inside the classroom and outside the classroom was measured by means of two questionnaires: Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and Japanese Use Anxiety. The FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) consists of 33 statements, to which the students responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". A high score indicates a high level of anxiety. An example is "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in Japanese class". Nine items from French Use Anxiety (see MacIntyre & Gardner, 1988) were adapted for the study measuring anxiety felt when using Japanese outside the classroom. The students rated the
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items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". A high score indicates a high level of anxiety. A sample item is "I am sure that I would get nervous if I had to speak Japanese to a sales clerk".

Perceived competence in Japanese
The students' perceived competence in Japanese was measured by means of two questionnaires: Self-rating of proficiency and Can-do test. The students rated their speaking and listening proficiency levels according to the description of International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR). There are 12 levels in descriptors ranging from "0", no proficiency to "5", native like level. The students rated their perceived ability in using Japanese in various situations. Can-do test (see MacIntyre, Noels, & Clément, 1997) assessed the average degree of frequency that students felt competent using Japanese when speaking and listening. The students rated 10 listening and 18 speaking statements using 5-point scale with the anchors "never" and "all the time". A high score indicates a high level of incompetency. In other words, a high score shows a low level of confidence. A decrease in score indicates improvement in the skills, or increase in confidence. Examples are "I can give street directions in Japanese" and "I understand Japanese movies without subtitles".

Oral test
Structured-oral interview was administered individually in the researcher's office to measure Japanese speaking skills. There were three sections in the interview: 1) answer questions in a researcher-lead interview; 2) develop questions to interview the researcher; and 3) tell two sets of stories based on picture prompt. The first two sections were designed to measure student's conversational skills. The last section aimed to elicit a long discourse in the form of monologue.

Listening comprehension test
Listening comprehension test was developed and recorded on an audiotape to measure Japanese listening skills. A paper-based test consisted of 19 short conversations and talks and one short public announcement (monologues). After the students listened to each text once on the tape, they answered in simple English on the paper.

Procedures
Prior to the first meeting with the NS partner, all measures on anxiety, perceived competence, and listening test were collected in weeks 2 and 3 in the classroom. Oral-pre tests were conducted individually between weeks 2 and 4. When a student had completed 10 hours of meetings, all the measures were collected independently. All measures on anxiety, perceived competence, listening and speaking from 40 subjects were collected before and after the interaction.

All students and NS partners were matched in week 2 in second semester. As a part of the course, all the students met regularly for a total of 10 hours between weeks 4 and 14 during the semester. A majority of the students (77.5%) completed their time requirement at 5th or 6th meeting. On average, each meeting took between 1.5 and 2 hours. During the meetings, both students and NSs were not allowed to use English to maximise the use of Japanese. The students wrote about their experience in written journals in English soon after every meeting had been completed.
Results
The objectives of the study were to 1) measure the effects of 10-hour interaction on oral communication skills; 2) measure the effects of the interaction on anxiety and perceived competence; and 3) examine qualitatively the nature of experience described by the students in written journals. For the analysis, a Wilcoxon signed ranks test was administered except for the measures of the self-ratings of the ISLPR. A Sign test was administered for the self-rating of the ISLPR. The test of significance level was selected at $\alpha = .05$.

Effects of interaction on speaking and listening skills
The scores on the listening and speaking tests were compared and the results are presented in Tables 1 and 2. For the listening scores, 38 subjects (95%) showed increases and two subjects showed decreases, while for the speaking scores, 36 subjects (90%) showed increases and six subjects showed decreases. The mean score of listening test improved 7.4 points from 20.5 to 27.9 and speaking test improved 9.9 points from 68.7 to 78.6. Results showed that there was a statistically significant difference in overall listening and speaking competence before and after the interaction (Listening; $z = -5.398, p = 0.000$; Speaking; $z = -5.001, p = 0.000$). The null hypothesis that there is no difference between before and after interaction can therefore be rejected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>INCREASED</th>
<th>NO CHANGE</th>
<th>DECREASED</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>38 (95%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
<td>40 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>36 (90%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (10%)</td>
<td>40 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Mean scores on listening and speaking before and after interaction ($N = 40$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TIME 1 (PRE-TEST)</th>
<th>TIME 2 (POST-TEST)</th>
<th>M Diff.</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>20.5 Mean</td>
<td>27.9 Mean</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>68.7 Mean</td>
<td>78.6 Mean</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$

Effects of interaction on anxiety and perceived competence

Anxiety
Thirty-three items on the FLCAS measures and nine items on Japanese Use Anxiety (JUA) were compared and the results are presented in Tables 3 and 4. In the scores for inside the class, 29 subjects (72.5%) showed decreases and 11 subjects (27.5%) showed increases. In the scores for outside the class, 30 subjects (75%) showed decreases, two
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subjects (5%) showed no change, and eight subjects (20%) showed increases. The mean score of the FLCAS (anxiety inside class) decreased 8.0 points from 94.4 to 86.4 and JUA (anxiety outside class) decreased 2.7 points from 24.8 to 22.1. Statistical results suggest that there is a significant difference in anxiety inside and outside the classroom before and after the interaction (Anxiety inside class: $z = -2.945, p = 0.003$; Anxiety outside class: $z = -3.006, p = 0.003$). The null hypothesis that there is no difference between before and after can be rejected.

Table 3
Change of scores on anxiety inside and outside classroom ($N = 40$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INCREASED</th>
<th>NO CHANGE</th>
<th>DECREASED</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inside (FLCAS)</td>
<td>11 (27.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>29 (72.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside (JUA)</td>
<td>8 (20%)</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
<td>30 (75%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4
Mean scores on anxiety inside and outside before and after interaction ($N = 40$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME 1 (PRE-TEST)</th>
<th>TIME 2 (POST-TEST)</th>
<th>M Diff.</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety inside (FLCAS)</td>
<td>94.4</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>−8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety outside (JUA)</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>−2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05

Perceived competence
Self-ratings on speaking and listening skills by means of the ISLPR and Can-do test were compared. For the self-rating on the ISLPR, more than 65% of the students suggest that their speaking and listening skills have improved after the interaction with NS (see Table 5). Statistical results show that there is a significant difference in their perceptions of both speaking and listening proficiency (Speaking: $R = 1, N = 28, p \leq 0.01$; Listening: $R = 4, N = 31, p \leq 0.01$). The null hypothesis that there is no difference between before and after can be rejected.

Table 5
Change of self-rating on ISLPR ($N = 40$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMPROVED</th>
<th>NO CHANGE</th>
<th>DEGRADED</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Listening</td>
<td>26 (65%)</td>
<td>9 (22.5%)</td>
<td>5 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Speaking</td>
<td>27 (67.5%)</td>
<td>12 (30%)</td>
<td>1 (2.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Educating: Weaving Research into Practice

For the self-rating on the Can-do test, the scores on perceived competence in listening (10 items) and speaking Japanese (18 items) in various situations were compared and the results are presented in Tables 6 and 7. For listening scores, 27 subjects (67.5%) showed increases, four subjects (10%) showed no change and nine subjects (22.5%) showed decreases. For speaking scores, 32 subjects (80%) showed increases and eight subjects (20%) showed decreases. The mean score of perceived listening decreased 2.5 points from 30.8 to 28.3 and perceived speaking decreased 6.9 points from 50.7 to 43.8. Results suggest that there was a statistically significant difference in overall listening and speaking competence before and after the interaction (Perceived Listening; \( z = -3.109, p = 0.002 \): Speaking; \( z = -4.419, p = 0.000 \)). The null hypothesis that there is no difference between before and after interaction can be rejected.

Table 6
Change of perceived competence on Can-do test (\( N = 40 \))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>IMPROVED</th>
<th>NO CHANGE</th>
<th>DEGRADED</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived</td>
<td>27 (67.5%)</td>
<td>4 (10%)</td>
<td>9 (22.5%)</td>
<td>40 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived</td>
<td>32 (80%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>8 (20%)</td>
<td>40 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 7
Mean scores on perceived listening and perceived speaking before and after interaction (\( N = 40 \))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TIME 1 (PRE-TEST)</th>
<th>TIME 2 (POST-TEST)</th>
<th>M Diff.</th>
<th>( p )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>-2.5</td>
<td>0.002*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>-6.9</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* \( p < .05 \)

Discussion

The findings suggest that there were clear improvements in relation to the students' listening and speaking ability based on the tests in this study. Of 40 students, 38 (95%) improved listening skills and 36 (90%) improved speaking skills and the statistical tests showed that these differences were significant.

Students' perceived competence in both listening and speaking skills were less positive, except for perceived speaking competence in Can-do test. Nevertheless, more than 65% of students indicated that their perceived competence in listening and speaking were improved in both measures, i.e., self-rating on the ISLPR and Can-do test. This suggests that the students were feeling much more confident in their Japanese than before. The reasons for less positive results may be due to the sensitivity of the measurements and the students' level of anxiety. Since the ISLPR describes general
proficiency level in linguistic skills, it can be difficult to show clear changes in a short period of language learning. This may be the reason why 22.5% and 30% of the students showed "no change" in listening and speaking skills respectively. In relation to Can-do test, the students might have felt their progress in speaking more clearly as they attempted to participate in conversation as meetings progressed, than just listening to what the NSs said. Thus, it was more obvious to them that their speaking skills were improved than a subtle feeling of improvements in listening skills. Another reason for less positive results on self-rating can be related to the finding of MacIntyre, Noels and Clément (1997), where anxiety can bias perceptions of competence since anxious students tend to underestimate, whereas relaxed students tend to overestimate their language skills.

The comparison of means scores on anxiety showed that decrease in anxiety level was significant: 72.5% of the students felt that their anxiety inside classroom decreased and 75% felt that their anxiety outside classroom decreased. However, some students showed increases in anxiety. For anxiety inside classroom, 27.5% of the students and for outside classroom, 20% indicated that their anxiety increased. Among these students, the majority showed mild increases in anxiety and only a few students indicated severe cases of anxiety inside the classroom. Five students who indicated severe increases inside classroom were also found in the group who showed increases outside classroom. Judging from their meeting pattern, these students delayed their meetings and squeezed them towards the end of the semester when other students managed to meet regularly and completed their meetings. Thus, these students might have felt that they were pressured to meet before the end of the semester (as 10-hour meeting was a part of assessment in the course), causing increases in anxiety.

Language anxiety is latent and unique to classroom learning. When the learning took place outside the classroom and involved NS who were independent of classroom language learning (i.e., those who do not make judgements on students' ability in Japanese), students' beliefs and attitudes in language learning can be transformed. Since students no longer need to fear of negative evaluation by peers and teacher, they felt ease about talking in Japanese and consequently willingness to communicate increased. A series of meetings with the same NS partner enhanced communication as they became familiar with each other. Although students may not be competent in communicating in Japanese, they had plenty of opportunity and time to demonstrate that they have mature thoughts and ideas in Japanese as they would normally do in their L1. Thus, their self-esteem was not damaged by their immature and insufficient linguistic skills. Motivation for learning also increased. When they experienced success in communicating in Japanese, they wanted to learn more and improve. The repeated success in communication especially in linguistically "unprotected" situations (as opposed to language input which is carefully controlled by the teacher in the classroom) resulted in building confidence and sense of achievement. When they were not so successful in communicating, they became aware of their weakness in the TL and made clear decisions about what to concentrate on and made conscious efforts to overcome the weakness. Thus, it seemed clear that they were more motivated to learn Japanese than before when they were just learning in the classroom.
Conclusions

The study found that 10 hours of interaction with NSs outside the classroom is effective not only in improving Japanese oral communication skills, but also in reducing students' language anxiety and increasing students' perceived competence in Japanese. These findings lend support to the previous studies reported by other researchers in the past (e.g., Eisenchlas & Hortigüera, 1999–2000; Imura, in press; Ingram, 1978a, 1978b, 1980; Kurtz & Luna, 1983; Stoller et al., 1995).

Opportunity to interact with NS outside the classroom had a very positive ripple effect on learners. The students had intensive exposure to Japanese and more personalised use of Japanese. They actively engaged in real communication and felt less anxious about using Japanese both inside and outside classroom. When the students experienced success in communicating in Japanese, they felt a sense of achievement and joy and wanted to learn more. When they were not so successful in Japanese communication, the students became more aware of their weaknesses and made conscious efforts to improve. Thus, regardless of the outcome of meetings, it seems obvious that they were more motivated for learning than when they had only classroom instruction. Consequently, their willingness to communicate increased and their repeated success in communication resulted in building their confidence in Japanese and their oral communication skills improved—"communicative confidence leads to communicative competence" (Savignon, 1997, p. 48). Therefore, the "vicious cycle" of language learning (Baker & MacIntyre, 2003) was reversed and it suggests that the challenge associated with FL teaching was met. If as little as 10 hours make differences to students' FL learning outcome, interaction with NS should be strongly recommended for learners, especially those who are studying in a FL environment. This study has highlighted the importance of anxiety and perceived competence on the development of oral communication skills and contributed to understanding of the effectiveness of interaction with NS. Although this study was based on a small sample of students, it served as a first attempt to demonstrate quantitatively the impact of interaction with NS on FL education. Clearly, further research in this area is needed.

References


The Effect of Anxiety on Oral Communication Skills


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