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Author(s)	Andersson, Shawn
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Measuring Peer Communicative Confidence, Partner Preference, and English Proficiency Among Japanese English Majors

日本の英語専攻学生におけるピアコミュニケーション自信、
パートナーの選好、および英語能力の測定

Shawn Andersson

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the progression of English proficiency, peer communicative confidence, and partner preferences across the academic years of Japanese university students majoring in English. Drawing on the literature surrounding affective factors in second language acquisition, particularly foreign language anxiety (FLA) and its impact on speaking confidence, the research explores how these emotional variables influence language learning experiences. A survey conducted with 174 participants from first to fourth-year English majors at a Japanese university examines changes in English proficiency, peer speaking confidence, and preferences for communication partners (friend vs. stranger). Results show a gradual increase in English proficiency and peer communicative confidence over the course of students' university life. Additionally, the majority of participants preferred communicating with friends, though this preference decreased slightly as students advanced in their studies. This study contributes to the understanding of how emotional and social factors shape language learning, highlighting the role of peer interactions in fostering both language development and anxiety. It suggests that further investigation into peer dynamics and anxiety-triggering contexts is essential for creating more effective language learning environments.

Keywords: Foreign language learning; English as a foreign language (EFL), Peer partner preference, Speaking confidence

1. Background

Affective factors shape how learners engage with and succeed in language learning and are therefore pivotal in second language acquisition. Mynard (2016) defines these factors as emotional elements such as moods, feelings, beliefs, preferences, and attitudes, which all play a significant role in determining language learning outcomes. Among these, emotions like motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety have long been recognized as influencing the effectiveness of language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). Notably, foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been identified as a significant barrier to language learning (Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012; Liu, 2016). Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 128) describe FLA as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the unique challenges of language learning.” Later, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994, p. 284)

expanded on this by explaining FLA as “the tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning.”

Particularly in classroom settings, speaking-related anxiety is a major concern, given the prominence of peer-to-peer communication as a form of interaction. While communicative activities are crucial for fostering development within the learner's zone of proximal development (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), they can simultaneously act as triggers for anxiety, especially in situations that require students to perform in front of others. Thus, communicative tasks often present a tension between facilitating learning and eliciting anxiety.

Research has shown that learners often experience anxiety around their interlanguage, particularly due to concerns about grammatical errors (Ahmed et al., 2017). High-anxiety learners may avoid certain grammatical structures altogether (Horwitz et al., 1986). Such anxiety can create psychological barriers that severely hinder learners' speaking ability and overall progress (Aghajani & Amanzadeh, 2017). Consequently, a wealth of research has highlighted an inverse relationship between foreign language anxiety and target language performance (Demirdaş & Bozdoğan, 2013). A meta-analysis by Botes et al. (2020) reinforced these findings, demonstrating that FLA negatively impacts all language competencies, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Moreover, peer-based speaking tasks are particularly anxiety-inducing, amplifying feelings of discomfort (Andersson & Nakahashi, 2020; Kushida, 2018).

Within educational settings, communicative discourse typically involves both educator-student and student-student interactions. This study specifically focuses on the latter, as peer-to-peer communication is central to language learning. From a sociolinguistic perspective, such interactions are essential in facilitating learners' progress within their zone of proximal development, where students can collaborate with more proficient peers to bridge the gap between their current language abilities and their potential (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Furthermore, peer interactions serve as crucial sites for mediation, allowing learners to co-construct knowledge and internalize complex cognitive processes (Lantolf, 2000). Therefore, while peer communication plays a vital role in language acquisition, it can also contribute to foreign language anxiety. Speaking-related anxiety may stem from fears of making mistakes, being judged by peers, or lacking self-confidence (Melouah, 2013). In contrast, communicative confidence, the opposite of anxiety, is essential for learners to successfully produce language.

An underexplored area of research is the role that partner preference plays in students' anxiety levels. Specifically, it remains unclear whether learners experience different levels of anxiety and prefer different interaction partners based on whether they are paired with friends or strangers. Previous research suggests that Japanese learners may experience heightened discomfort when speaking English in front of peers (Andersson, 2020; Andersson, in review) and that interacting with unfamiliar interlocutors may exacerbate this anxiety (Kushida, 2018).

Given the importance of attitudes and confidence in language learning, students majoring in English hold a unique responsibility. Many of these students will go on to teach future generations of English learners in Japan. Therefore, fostering confidence in these students is

essential, not only for their own development but also for them to pass on this confidence to their future students. It is also important to gauge their level of progress in learning English to assess if their classwork is effectively instilling the necessary communicative skills.

This study aims to explore the progression of English proficiency and peer speaking confidence among university students majoring in English, from their first year through to graduation. Additionally, it seeks to examine how partner preference (whether students prefer interacting with friends, strangers, or either) changes over the course of their studies. Data for this study are drawn from a broader research project focused on different aspects of language learning.

2. Methodology

Participants

Participants were recruited from a national university in Japan through convenience sampling. A total of 186 students were invited to complete the survey, with 181 responses received, resulting in a response rate of 97.31%. Seven participants were eliminated because they did not major in English, resulting in 174 remaining participants. The sample included 59 first-year students, 58 second-year students, 23 third-year students, and 34 fourth-year students.

Demographic information for the participants is as follows. 70 identified as male, and 104 as female. Of the total sample, 149 participants reported their English proficiency scores from various testing systems. Two participants had achieved Eiken Level 1, fifteen passed Level 2, one passed Pre-2, and thirty-two reached Pre-1. One participant scored 5.0 on the IELTS, three scored 6.0, ten scored 6.5, and three scored 7.0. TOEFL scores included a mean of 553 for the paper-based test (range = 540–560), 93 for the internet-based test, and 586 for the institutional program (range = 530–680). The average TOEIC score was 875 (range = 700–975). Additionally, one participant reported their English proficiency as “beginner,” and nine as “intermediate.” On average, participants began learning English at age 10 and had studied the language for around 10 years.

Instruments and Procedure

Participants' reported English proficiency scores were consolidated and converted to equivalent levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which provided a method to compare various test scores' proficiency levels. The participants who wrote “beginner” or “intermediate” were excluded, given the inability to find a comparable score. Descriptive statistics were calculated to make comparisons.

Next, a survey was developed that solicited information pertaining to participants' demographics, confidence in communicating with peers, and partner preferences. Participants were asked to rate their overall confidence in interacting with peers on a 4-point Likert scale. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree) to stop participants from selecting a neutral response, a trend commonly seen in Japan (Wang et al., 2008). The statement is worded as, “I feel confident when speaking English with my classmates,” which was adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986). They were also asked their partner preference between a friend, a

stranger, or either. The survey was administered one time in person.

3. Results

Table 1 displays the results for participants' CEFR equivalent scores. First-year students had the highest proportion of B1 equivalent scores (28%), followed by second-year students (17%). No students reported B1 equivalent scores in the third and fourth years. Next, the majority of all grades had B2 equivalent scores. The proportion increased each year as more students shifted from B1 to B2. However, it decreased to 84% in the fourth year as a greater proportion of students moved into the C1 bracket. Finally, the C1 level had a gradual increase for every year until the fourth year, where it made up 16% of the surveyed participants.

Table 1
Participants' CEFR equivalent scores

CEFR equivalent	1st Year		2nd Year		3rd Year		4th Year	
	Num	Per	Num	Per	Num	Per	Num	Per
B1	12	28%	7	17%	0	0%	0	0%
B2	30	70%	31	74%	16	89%	26	84%
C1	1	2%	4	10%	2	11%	5	16%

Table 2 displays the descriptive results for participants' confidence in communicating with another peer. The first year had the lowest mean of 2.46 out of 4, which increased to 2.56 in the second year. However, third-year students rated an average of 2.36. The fourth year had the highest mean (2.85).

Table 2
Participants' confidence in communicating with peers

Grade	M	STD
1st	2.46	0.83
2nd	2.56	0.68
3rd	2.36	0.73
4th	2.85	0.74

**note: 4-point Likert scale*

Table 3 shows the results for participants' preferences toward interacting with a peer friend, a stranger, or either. First-year students expressed the highest proportion (91%) who wanted to interact with a friend.

Table 3
Participants' partner preference

Grade	Friend	Stranger	Either
1st	91%	0%	9%
2nd	87%	0%	13%
3rd	83%	11%	6%
4th	88%	0.03	9%

4. Discussion

This study shows promising results for English-major students' progress over their university experience regarding language proficiency scores and confidence. Students saw a gradual increase in their language proficiency scores year-over-year. They began their university lives in the CEFR B1 range, and most gradually moved into the B2 range; some even were able to achieve the C1 equivalent. Next, besides the third-year students, participants experienced a gradual increase in confidence from the first year to the fourth. It is noteworthy that the third-year student sample size was the smallest ($n=18$) out of the four brackets, which could explain the discrepancy. Overall, these results suggest that the curriculum is effective in instilling English competency and confidence.

For partner preference, almost all first-year students elected to interact with a peer friend. This may be due to students' lower confidence level or lower English proficiency. They may feel safer with a friend and be conscious of making mistakes in front of a stranger. This preference mostly stayed the same for all grades, remaining in the 80% range. This highlights the fact that students may be more comfortable communicating with someone they can trust and know, and educators can incorporate this when assigning partners for group activities.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the evolving nature of English proficiency and peer communicative confidence among English major students throughout their university studies. By examining changes in proficiency and partner preferences across four years, it sheds light on how students' experiences in higher education contribute to their development as language learners. Despite the overall improvement in proficiency and confidence, the consistency of partner preference toward friends, even in later years, underscores the enduring impact of comfort and familiarity in language interactions.

However, the study's cross-sectional design limits our ability to make definitive conclusions about individual growth over time. Future research employing a longitudinal approach could provide more comprehensive insights into how students' skills and preferences develop on an individual level. Additionally, expanding the scope of proficiency assessments to include speaking-based evaluations and exploring the connection between partner preference and language anxiety could further illuminate the social dimensions of language acquisition.

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