

Research On Foreign Language Anxiety in Japanese Acquisition

Jingwen Qin

School of Foreign Languages, Shanxi Normal University, Taiyuan, Shanxi, 030000, China
1914020120@stu.sxnu.edu.cn

Abstract. Foreign language anxiety is a common emotional factor in foreign language learning and is not conducive to learners' development. Since anxiety is specific to certain target languages, current research mainly focuses on English learners, and few studies take Asia languages, such as Chinese or Japanese as the target language. Based on these, this study reviews the current research on Japanese language learning anxiety from the perspective of linguistic classification and summarizes the teaching methods to reduce foreign language anxiety. It is proposed that teachers and learners should be encouraged to rethink their perceptions of mistakes. In addition, the order of knowledge acquisition of Japanese grammar should be respected, and the potential interest of learners in Japanese culture should be utilized. In addition, the establishment of a lighthearted and inclusive learning environment, the judicious use of group activities, and the appropriate administration of examinations and assessments can also be effective in alleviating anxiety.

Keywords: Foreign language anxiety; Japanese education; cross-culture, linguistics.

1. Introduction

With the development of economic globalization and social media, foreign language learning has become a need for economic development to satisfy interests. The Japan Foundation's 2021 Survey Report on "Japanese-Language Education Abroad" indicates that 141 countries and regions around the world are implementing Japanese language education [1].

In recent years, even during the COVID-19 era, the primary motivation for foreign language learners to learn Japanese remains spontaneous interest, such as Japanese culture, encompassing history, literature, art; and popular culture, such as anime, manga, and fashion [1]. Furthermore, the number of Japanese language institutions and teachers is the second largest it has ever been, indicating a pressing need for continued growth and development in the field of Japanese language education [1].

Previous studies on foreign language learning have concentrated on external factors such as teaching and examination, whereas at the end of the last century, there was a growing recognition of the importance of internal factors such as motivation, belief, and anxiety in the learning process.

Horwitz proposed the concept of foreign language anxiety (FLA), which he defined as a series of complex self-perceptions, feelings, and behaviors that exist independently of other anxiety types in the process of foreign language learning [2]. Concurrently, FLA is a prevalent phenomenon in the context of foreign language learning [2]. A significant number of studies have demonstrated that a considerable proportion of students exhibit a moderate level of anxiety in the context of foreign language learning. Furthermore, it has been highlighted that FLA has adverse effects on learners [2].

Since anxiety is specific to certain target languages, current research mainly focuses on English learners, and few studies take Asia languages, such as Chinese or Japanese as the target language. This limits the dissemination and understanding of FLA theory among countries and cultures. Additionally, there is a paucity of empirical studies on educational methods, with few and scattered programs that can provide support for front-line teachers from the perspective of researchers. Finally, it is recommended that countries with similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds should endeavor to enrich their independent theoretical systems, taking into account the cultural and linguistic diversity of their populations.

This paper therefore focuses on FLA with Japanese as the target language, summarizing the current Japanese FLA from the perspective of linguistics, and outlining some methods to alleviate anxiety. The aim is to summarize and inspire future research in the field of FLA, and to provide educators with insights into learners' anxiety and methods to alleviate it.

2. Fundamental Concept of FLA

2.1. Source of FLA

To address the question of the difficulties encountered by individuals when learning a foreign language, an increasing number of researchers have been interested in the affection aspects such as anxiety, and motivations of learners during foreign language acquisition. Horwitz and Young concluded that foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a situation-specific anxiety that can manifest or transfer into other kinds of anxiety, such as speaking anxiety or test anxiety [3,4].

Based on empirical evidence and Horwitz's definition, Luo proposed the Four-dimensional Source Model and the Four-component Construct Model, respectively, from the source and construction perspectives. These models are asserted to be rational and recognizable [4].

The Four-dimensional Source Model posits that the classroom environment, the learner's characteristics, the target language, and the process of foreign language learning can generate FLA, respectively. The Four-component Construct Model elucidates the specific skills associated with FLA, namely speaking anxiety, listening anxiety, reading anxiety, and writing anxiety. What should also be noted is that FLA is not fixed in the learning process, it changes with the progress of instructional levels and an individual's language performance.

In addition, studies have investigated the mechanism behind FLA from a neurological perspective, an article on the neuroscience of second language acquisition indicates that the left posterior supramarginal gyrus (PSMG) is activated during a second language communication task [5].

2.2. Effects of FLA

Horwitz and Luo et al. presented a synthesis of existing research, indicating that FLA exerts a negative effect across five dimensions: Academic, Cognitive, Social, Affective, and Personal [3,4].

Studies about the relationship between FLA and academic achievement consistently demonstrated a negative effect of FLA on academic achievement. From a cognitive perspective, both Tobias and Gardner have noted that FLA impairs three phases of cognitive processing: input, processing, and output. Among these phases, the interference in processing and output is the most significant. Regarding social dimensions, individuals with high FLA are less willing to speak, which suggests that learners with high anxiety are more likely to lack the appropriate presence, resulting in a negative attitude and motivation toward language learning, trauma arousal, and avoidance behavior [3].

There are also a few recent empirical studies on the underlying effects of FLA from a neuroscience perspective, a recent study implies that in the context of foreign language reading, FLA is negatively correlated with foreign language performance, suggesting that learners with high reading anxiety may experience inefficient vocabulary processing in foreign language reading [6].

3. FLA and Japanese Acquisition

By the theoretical framework established by Luo, namely the Four-dimensional Source Model, this review aims to elucidate the FLA in the context of Japanese as a target language and its learning process in terms of phonology, morphology, and pragmatics.

3.1. Japanese Phonology and FLA

In Japanese pronunciation, accent and intonation are the most important phonological elements that have been reported to cause FLA. Different accent affects the meaning of words and the segmentation of meanings in sentences. Besides, Japanese intonation reflects the speaker's attitudes

and feelings, which could also affect social functions. Japanese is characterized by mora-timed rhythm, which emphasizes a rather flat intonation and the concept of isochronicity of meters, suggesting that Japanese pronunciation is challenging for stress-timed and syllable-timed rhythm users.

Widespread anxiety has also been reported during the Japanese language acquisition process. Yoshiro Kawahara suggests that the more nervous learners are about their pronunciation, the more likely they are to compare their pronunciation with others and value others' comments [7]. For the anxiety of Japanese pronunciation, he also found reliable influencing factors, such as learners' anxiety about lack of pronunciation learning skills, caring about others' evaluation of their pronunciation, feeling ashamed of their pronunciation, and being corrected by teachers [7]. It proves that foreign language learners have widespread anxiety in the process of learning Japanese pronunciation.

3.2. Japanese Morphology and FLA

Japanese words are written in the following systems: Kanji, Hiragana, and Katakana. Japanese kanji are derived from Chinese characters and belong to the hieroglyphic family, which is more complex and numerous than syllabic characters. Katakana and hiragana are syllabic characters derived from the radicals or branches of the cursive and regular script of Chinese characters, respectively.

Some researchers have conducted experiments on the efficiency and accuracy of Japanese semantic judgments by Chinese and English native speakers, suggesting that word processing speed and accuracy are higher when Japanese kanji are processed as a whole, and the cognitive strategy based on pronunciation and semantics is more advantageous in processing syllabic characters represented by katakana [8]. The study of neuroscience has shown that the use of kanji and kana activates different areas of the brain, proving that to improve the use of Japanese characters, it is necessary to be aware of the characteristics of learners from different language backgrounds [9]. Therefore, it can be inferred that foreign language learners may be affected by different language backgrounds in the acquisition of Japanese characters, resulting in different levels of anxiety.

In the present system of Japanese words, kanji words account for 70% of Japanese vocabulary. Researchers have pointed out that learners from the Western language systems, French and Russian, show higher levels of anxiety about Japanese in the Japanese reading task because they feel more unfamiliar with the non-phonological language system [10]. This confirms that some foreign language learners may feel obvious anxiety at the beginning of seeing unfamiliar written expression systems.

Some studies have also investigated the acquisition of Japanese morphology and syntax by foreign language learners and found that there is a fixed order of acquisition [11].

Nevertheless, few studies have investigated the specific factors of anxiety during Japanese morphology acquisition and discussed different anxieties from a cross-cultural perspective. This is an important area for further research, as it will help to provide an effective support system for cross-cultural language learning and help learners reduce FLA.

3.3. Japanese Pragmatics and FLA

From the perspective of geographical and historical factors of cultural formation, Japan is located in an isolated island country with a high frequency of natural disasters and a dense population distribution. These factors have gradually formed the unique collectivism-culture, which tends to speculate on non-literal meanings and pay attention to the appropriate expression in daily communication.

As Ji-Young Jung asserts, to achieve pragmatic competence in the target language, foreign language learners need to possess the ability to convey and interpret non-literal meanings, perform politeness functions, and utilize cultural knowledge [12]. Consequently, when the culture of the target language differs from that of Japan, particularly for learners from an individualistic culture, they are more likely to encounter significant challenges in language learning due to unfamiliar pragmatics

practices. Moreover, from the perspective of collectivism and individualism, Michiko Toyama and Yoshitaka Yamazaki propose that learners with collectivist cultural experience demonstrate higher FLA and suggest that this offers the possibility of exploring FLA from a cross-cultural perspective [13]. However, few studies on second language acquisition have explored the relationship between pragmatic habits gap and anxiety from a cross-cultural perspective. Further research in this direction helps understand foreign language learners and guide foreign language teaching.

4. Approaches to Alleviate FLA

The current study provides a synoptic overview of potential strategies for reducing FLA, while also highlighting a paucity of practical teaching recommendations for reducing specific language anxiety in the field of study. This section will present an overview of the current literature on the alleviation of FLA in two key areas: suggestions for improving Japanese pedagogical practices and alternative methods for reducing FLA.

4.1. Improving Japanese Pedagogical Practices

4.1.1. Phonology

Studies have demonstrated that learners experience anxiety during the learning process, particularly regarding the possibility of being identified as having incorrect pronunciation. This can lead to comparisons with others and concerns about the evaluation of their pronunciation [7].

It is of paramount significance for educators to recognize that Japanese language learners may initially experience distress due to the influence of their native language. So being aware of the difficulties that specific learners (not only the differences between different languages but even the pronunciation habits of dialects) may encounter during the process of Japanese language acquisition is essential.

In addition, both teachers and students should have the belief that errors in Japanese pronunciation are likely to be a normal consequence of the influence of the native language. Therefore, teachers need to help learners accept that they are allowed to make mistakes. At the same time, teachers who are willing to share their difficulties in learning with their students can also help students realize the universality of FLA in language learning, which can also relieve anxiety to a certain extent.

4.1.2. Morphology

Students with anxiety about word presentation should be encouraged to focus on the origin of Japanese kanji and to develop cognitive strategies for combining words into units, to reduce the cognitive load involved in processing them.

When the learner's knowledge structure and mental state are not yet prepared, it is more likely that they will experience difficulty and anxiety. In addition, it has been observed by various researchers that there are discernible patterns of acquisition in the Japanese grammatical system [11]. Consequently, prioritizing and respecting the rules and sequence of language grammar acquisition for learners, namely canonical word order schemata > N no N p > adj N p > coordination > subordination > relativization, can be postulated that the application of the order of acquisition rules may not only facilitate cognitive learning but also result in a reduction in the anxiety levels of learners.

4.1.3. Pragmatics

In the individual dimension, educators should prioritize enhancing learners' motivation, including interest in Japanese culture, history, and language learning. Furthermore, it is important to consider learners' beliefs about language learning. The utilization of techniques such as natural communication and role-playing can facilitate collaboration between teachers and students.

Furthermore, recent studies have demonstrated that the computer-mediated communication (CMC) method, derived from computer technology, can be employed as a teaching aid to enhance learners' interest and alleviate their language anxiety to a certain extent.

4.2. Adjust Learning Environment

The role of teachers is evolving with the advent of modern education. In addition to facilitating the learning of content, educators must also address the learning environment and emotional factors as research has indicated that anxiety is a significant impediment to learning.

Foreign language teachers with humorous and patient traits are able to ease students' anxiety levels [14]. In classrooms with a humorous atmosphere, students have lower levels of anxiety, contribute to increased interest and motivation in the target language, and are more willing to participate in presentations. For instance, the appropriate utilization of exaggeration, comedic gestures or imitations, and the presentation of homemade comedic films or musical compositions constitute specific forms of humor.

Besides, students who are reluctant to express and show resistance in learning may be experiencing a strong sense of anxiety, patience and tolerance to wait and provide support is important. Consequently, teachers can benefit from mindfulness meditation to cultivate themselves and learners' awareness of the present moment and cultivate unconditional acceptance of the present. Furthermore, teachers can engage in dialogue with learners. Identifying and modifying learners' erroneous cognitive processes in language learning can also regulate learners' emotions.

The design of group activities also can be employed as a means of alleviating FLA. Foreign language learners have been shown to feel more secure in concentration and more willing to participate in speaking activities. Therefore, appropriate teamwork is considered to be the teaching mode that can alleviate FLA [15].

Finally, exams and assessments should not be a huge pressure, and an attempt should be made to not cause too much anxiety and stress to students in the after-school tests while taking into account reliability and validity [14].

5. Conclusion

It is observed that current FLA studies mainly focus on the case of Western languages as the target language, and there are few empirical studies on how to alleviate the anxiety of pictographic languages such as Chinese or Japanese.

This article sets the target language as Japanese, collates the current literature related to Japanese language anxiety, and systematically collates some methods to alleviate Japanese language anxiety from the dimension of Japanese language acquisition. For instance, teachers and learners should be encouraged to rethink their perceptions of mistakes, to respect the order of Japanese grammar knowledge acquisition, and to utilize learners' potential interest in Japanese culture. Furthermore, the creation of a humorous and fully inclusive classroom atmosphere, the appropriate utilization of group activities, and the adjusted implementation of exams and assessments can also be effective in alleviating FLA.

It is worth noting that due to insufficient research on Japanese language anxiety, the suggestions listed in this paper lack empirical research support. Further studies on language acquisition other than English are required in the future, and empirical results on measures to reduce FLA are still needed.

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