Speaking More, Making Friends and Feeling Less Anxious:
Learner Perceptions of a Novel Oral-Communication Course

by

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Abstract

The present study investigates first-year undergraduate STEM students' perceptions of the impact of an interaction-centered English curriculum on their feelings of social anxiety. The study employed two forms of qualitative analysis to gain greater insight into student perceptions regarding aspects of the curriculum that Japanese learners from STEM majors reported as helpful in relieving social anxiety. The analyses presented in this paper support the overall conclusion that course activities played an important role in lowering learners' perceptions of social anxiety. An overwhelming number of learners responded that the curriculum and its activities contributed to lessened feelings of anxiousness and nervousness. Interestingly, increased interpersonal familiarity played as significant a role in relieving learners' feelings of social anxiety as the classroom activities themselves did. This indicates the need to focus on a new area of emphasis in helping to relieve interactional anxiety in the foreign language classroom: facilitating bonds of familiarity and friendship amongst learners. Additionally, this paper argues that with an understanding of the importance of ingroup-outgroup perception, the creation of a class-wide ingroup should become a curricular objective of communication classes focused on learner interaction, as in the present study.

Key Words: Social anxiety, English education, interaction, communication, STEM, group dynamics

1. Introduction

Social anxiety can be broadly characterized as a subjective, emotional response to certain social situations, particularly those where the possibility of becoming the focus of others attention or being evaluated by others exists (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Group- or pair-work activities in the foreign language classroom are one class of social situation that are likely to engender such feelings of unease in individuals. These activities present learners with a high degree of ambiguity which can be challenging to navigate, particularly when learners are compelled to work with unfamiliar classmates. Moreover, given the highly public nature of the Japanese language classroom, where learners feel that their actions are constantly being scrutinized and evaluated (King & Smith, 2017), it is not surprising that the thought of interacting with other learners can trigger feelings of discomfort in many learners. One of the fundamental assumptions underlying the use of group work techniques is that learners are comfortable with the notion of interacting with others (Cantwell & Andrews, 2002). This is not necessarily true for learners who feel uneasy with the prospect of

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interaction, however.

Social anxiety has been identified as a prominent factor underlying the tendency towards silence in Japanese university-level English learners (King & Smith, 2017). Furthermore, socially anxious English language learners have been shown to be reticent to interact with others in the classroom (Zhou, 2016). As pair-work, group-work and other pedagogical techniques which emphasize student interaction gain greater and greater prominence in language learning classrooms at all levels of education in Japan (e.g., Leeming, 2012; Mitchell, 2017), there is a need for greater study of the impact of social anxiety on the language learning that takes place when learners are placed in groups.

The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger study examining the effects of an interaction-focused English communication course on feelings of social anxiety among EFL learners from STEM majors. The first paper (Ostman & Xethakis, 2020) explores the broader interplay between social anxiety and student interaction among all learners in the course, while the second (Xethakis & Ostman, 2020) focuses more specifically on those learners who exhibited a higher degree of anxiety at the beginning of the course. In both cases, learners reported reductions in feelings of unease on measures of social anxiety. This paper focuses on the role that learners saw the curriculum itself playing in helping to ease their feelings of anxiety. The broader purpose of this paper is to provide teachers with a number of suggestions for managing the impact of social anxiety in communicative English classes, and is framed by the following research questions:

(1) In what ways did learners perceive course activities and other aspects of the curriculum as influencing feelings of social anxiety?

(2) What are the pedagogical implications of identifying these aspects?

1.1 Context

In order to provide a greater understanding of the findings of this paper, a brief outline of the course that provides the context for this study is presented in this section. The course is a full-year, required English communication course comprising two 90-minute classes per week, for a total of 60 over the academic year at a private university where students are primarily enrolled in STEM majors. The aim of the course is to facilitate the development of learners' interaction and communication skills through extended, unrehearsed conversations (of between 5 and 10 minutes length) with multiple partners on topics that connect directly with learners' lives (e.g., their hobbies, music, YouTube, their favorite places, etc). The rationale for instituting the curriculum was twofold: (1) to rectify the deficit in communication skills common among Japanese learners of English; and (2) to focus on a single English skill (speaking) in order to facilitate demonstrable improvement within the limited amount of contact time of a university English course. The overarching goal of the course is to encourage learners to interact with their classmates in a meaning-focused manner, and thus to hopefully come to see English as a means of communication rather than a subject to be mastered or a set of grammatical patterns to be memorized.

The course consists of units, each organized around a topic or theme. However, these topics and themes are not the primary focus of the course—they simply provide a framework for the language and interactional skills introduced in each unit, as well as a starting point and general focus for learners' interactions. Each unit commonly comprises a series of three classes. The first class focuses on language work to help students build up a collection of words and phrases they can use in their interactions. Also included in this first class are a number of structured activities presenting models of questions and responses which students are encouraged to use in short exchanges with other students. The second class of the cycle features a number of activities, as well as the introduction of conversation strategies, such as asking follow-up questions, clarifying meaning, etc., that allow learners to advance towards more independent forms of interactions and freer

forms of production. This allows learners to compile a repertoire of questions, answers and skills that they can employ in subsequent unrehearsed interactions. These interactions form the core of class three, which students spend in a series of progressively longer conversations, changing partners each time, and building up to a final five-minute conversation, recorded on classroom tablet computers. Learners then listen to their recorded conversations, and reflect on those parts of the interaction they felt were successful, as well as those they wish to improve in the following three-class cycle. Learners are assessed in two ten-minute speaking tests administered during classes 28 and 58, with grades based on the extent of their oral production.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

In total, 669 students (male = 457, female = 181, no response = 31) provided responses for the study described in this paper. All of the participants were non-English majors enrolled in the English communication course described above. Informed consent was obtained by means of a form stating, in Japanese, that any student not wishing to participate could decline simply by not responding to the questions on the survey. This form was included in the online survey described below.

2.2 Data Collection Procedures

Data for this study was gathered as part of larger study examining the impact of an interaction-focused English communication course on learners' feelings of social anxiety. As part of this larger study, scores on three measures of social anxiety administered at the beginning and end of the first-term of the course were collected and analyzed. (The instruments employed and further details on the procedures and analysis can be found in Ostman & Xethakis [2020] and Xethakis & Ostman [2020].) Post-test scores showed a decrease in learners' feelings of social anxiety over the course of the term, with effect sizes

on the different instruments ranging from medium to small. In order to investigate possible factors behind this decrease, a follow-up survey was given to learners in the second-term of the course. The Survey Monkey platform was used to administer the survey. The purpose of the survey was explained on the first page of the online survey. An informed consent form was included on the second page. This survey itself comprised two questions, which students answered on a six-point Likert-scale (1= *strongly disagree*; 6 = *strongly agree*). The first of these questions asked learners the extent to which they felt their anxiety had lessened during the course. This was followed with an open-ended response question asking learners to provide a reason for their answer (in Japanese). The second Likert-scale question on the follow-up survey asked learners whether or not they felt that the activities, pair-work, group work and other aspects of the course had helped ease their feelings of anxiety. This question was also followed with an open-ended question asking learners to provide a reason for their response. Results from the three social anxiety measures and learners' responses to the first question on the follow-up survey are examined in the two additional papers forming this study (Ostman & Xethakis, 2020; Xethakis & Ostman; 2020).

The present paper focuses exclusively on learner responses to the second question on the follow-up survey—*The pair work, conversations and other activities I do in English class help me to feel less anxious talking and interacting with my classmates.* The purpose of this question was to uncover more specific aspects of the course which learners felt played a role in easing their feelings of anxiety.

3. Results

The mean for responses to the second question on the follow-up survey was 4.47 (SD = 1.24), on a six-point scale. Slightly over 80% (540 of 669) of respondents answered in the affirmative (*somewhat agree* [4], *agree* [5] or *strongly agree* [6]). This result

provides a degree of evidence for the supposition that learners felt elements of the course were helpful in reducing their feelings of anxiety, and is in line with the findings reported in both Ostman and Xethakis (2020) and Xethakis and Ostman (2020), where learners' scores on measures of social anxiety decreased over the term of the course.

Responses to the open-ended question were analyzed to provide a better understanding of the elements of the course that learners felt played a role in easing their feelings of anxiety. Two complementary forms of analysis, corpus analysis and content analysis, were employed to provide a degree of triangulation, and thereby a greater degree of validity, to the results. Analyses were conducted independently and contemporaneously by each author, with the results combined below.

For the purpose of the corpus analysis, learner responses to the second question on the follow-up survey were combined to create corpuses, the texts of which were analyzed using corpus software (AntConc Version 3.5.8; Anthony, 2019), with the analysis was undertaken by the second author. The majority of the responses were given in Japanese, however for those responses written in English, the second author worked with a Japanese native professor to reverse-translate the responses into Japanese.

Initial investigation involved the generation of a keyword list from learner responses. Table 1 lists terms (excluding articles and conjunctions) that occurred with the highest frequency. In some cases, related terms have been grouped into single categories.

Table 1. Keywords from open-ended question on follow-up survey.

Term (s)	Instances
speak, talk	161
can/can't do	92
classmate(s); friend(s); everyone; partner	73
fun; enjoyable	70
conversation	68
English	62
anxiety; anxious	52
class; course	44
chance; opportunity; opportunities	40
activity; activities; practice; classwork	38
(various forms of) get used to	38
pair; pair work	34
make friends with; get along with	32
feel	27
many	25
easy to do	25
increase; increased	24
communication	23
to relieve; to be relieved	20
nervous; nervousness	18

Note: For the original Japanese, see Appendix.

Unsurprisingly, considering the course's focus on conversation between learners, the most commonly mentioned terms were related to speaking (161 instances). Included among the other more frequently mentioned terms, or categories of terms, are references to classmates (73) and making friends (32), to the class (44) and classroom activities (38), with pair-work, which was the primary context for most of the activities, explicitly mentioned an additional 34 times. Anxiety and nervousness (52 and 18 instances, respectively), and its relief (20) also featured prominently in the initial keyword analysis.

In carrying out the content analysis, learner responses were coded to uncover those aspects of the curriculum which learners perceived as easing their feelings of anxiety. Coding was undertaken by the first author, adopting a data-driven approach (Gibbs, 2007) with multiple rounds of coding conducted to maximize intra-coder reliability (Revesz, 2012). A

large number of the responses were included in two or more categories and thus there was some overlap between categories. The four primary categories and respective sub-categories which emerged from this analysis are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Categories and instances of sub-categories from responses to open-ended question on follow-up survey.

Categories	Sub-category (number of instances)	Total (638)
Classroom affordances	Opportunities to speak (55); specific activities (53); aspects of the curriculum (52); communicating with others (37); topics (14); teacher (10); other (23); activities caused anxiety (2)	244
Learner Internal Factors	Enjoyment (91); becoming able to speak or work with others (49); got used to class, working with others, etc. (41); finding motivation (22); making an effort (11); unable to speak English (14)	206
Interpersonal Relationships	Becoming friends (52); getting to know others (48); talking with different people than usual (31); other (24); unable to speak with others (10)	165
Feelings of Anxiety	No anxiety from the start (25); no effect on anxiety (21); lowered anxiety (15); still anxious (14)	73

As could be expected from the phrasing of the Likert-scale question, the most commonly mentioned category was that of affordances provided by the curriculum. In addition to specific classroom activities and aspects of the curriculum, such as the regular changing of partners, these affordances included opportunities to speak or communicate, and the topics that students spoke about. The second most frequently mentioned category was that of learner internal factors, such as the degree of enjoyment they felt in the class, learners' becoming able to speak with others, or growing accustomed to the curriculum. Relationships between learners that formed during the course were a third significant factor in easing feelings of anxiety. Finally, a smaller number of learners more directly mentioned positive as well as negative relationships between their feelings of anxiety and the curriculum.

The categories that emerged from the content analysis are broadly congruent with the findings of the corpus analysis, and many of the keywords from the initial corpus analysis can be easily mapped onto the categories emerging from the content analysis. For example, mentions of the terms "pair-work," "activities," "opportunities" and "class," as well as variations on these, clearly map onto the *classroom affordances* category. The fact that the terms "classmates," "partners," "making friends," and such occurred with such high frequency in the corpus helps to underscore the importance of the *interpersonal relationships* category. Interestingly, while a number of prominent keywords are tied to subcategories of the *learner internal changes* category (i.e., "enjoyment" and forms of "get used to"), this category includes several subcategories presenting different dimensions of learner experience as well, such *as becoming able to speak* or *work with others*, and *finding motivation*.

The congruence between the two forms of analysis indicates a degree of validity for the findings from both, as well as for the results discussed in more detail below. As the categories and subcategories which emerged in the process of content analysis are quite similar to those described in the related paper, Xethakis and Ostman (2020), and the responses presented as representative examples were also most often coded into congruent categories, the discussion of results presented below will focus primarily on those from the corpus analysis, except where the results of the two forms of analysis differ to a notable extent.

To gain further insight into the elements that learners perceived to be helpful in easing their feelings of anxiety, the discussion below will focus on three areas: (1) the manner in which learners employed the terms anxiety/anxiousness and nervous/nervousness; (2) learners' evaluation of course activities; and, (3) the importance of learner

acclimation and opportunities provided by the curriculum.

Anxiety and nervousness. According to the corpus analysis, respondents employed the terms "anxiety," "anxious," "nervous," and "nervousness" a total of 70 times, with some responses containing multiple instances. While respondents were most likely to express the belief that class activities contributed to reductions in anxiety/nervousness (34 instances), some respondents reported continued anxiety (10), and some anxiety exacerbated due to classroom activities (3). Examples from each category are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Subject anxiety and course curriculum

Category	Instances	Example
Anxiety/ nervousness reduced through participation in course activities	34	[R355] *Because I had to converse in English, I made friends with others and anxiety was reduced.* [R330] *Through repeated conversations, my nervousness was relieved.* [R206] *Because of help my* [from my partner; group members] *anxiety was lessened.*
Non-presence of anxiety/ nervousness	19	[R112] *I don't really get anxious, so I can't respon*d [to the question]. [R268] *I've never been anxious, so I don't know* [if course work reduced anxiety].
Anxiety/ nervousness still present or unabated	10	[R122] *Speaking with other people didn't make me nervous; speaking in English made me nervous.* [R127] *Because of the differences between English and Japanese, I still feel a little anxious when I speak in English.* [R117] *I get anxious about whether my English grammar is correct or not.*
Anxiety/ nervousness exacerbated	3	[R24] *Because I wasn't able to converse as well as the people around me, I felt anxiety.*

Note: R = respondent

The *feelings of anxiety* category which emerged from the content analysis showed a somewhat different emphasis. Interestingly, responses coded to indicate a general lack of anxiety, or those that mentioned the lack of the connection between aspects of the curriculum and feelings of reduced anxiety, were more prominent than those that indicated a reduction in anxiety. One reason for this difference is the fact that a number of the responses mentioning anxiety, such as R355, were coded into the *classroom affordances* category.

In the corpus analysis, terms related to anxiety and nervousness were frequently found to co-occur with terms corresponding to the English verb "relieve" (*yawaragu; yawarageru; tokeru; kanwa suru*). A breakdown of responses according to category is displayed below (Table 4).

Table 4. *Respondents' use of the verb "relieve"*

Category	Instances	Example
Anxiety/ nervousness relieved	12	[R570] *Through conversation, mutual feelings of nervousness were relieved.* [R330] *Through repeated conversations, my nervousness was relieved.*
Anxiety/ nervousness partially relieved	7	[R192] *Through speaking my nervousness was relieved a little.* [R256] *I can't say that my anxiety was completely relieved, but I think that* [the activities] *were useful.* [R52] *The practice helped relieve anxiety; however, because I can't speak English well, I still feel anxiety.*
Anxiety/ nervousness unrelieved	1	[R98] *I don't think that*

Note: R = respondent

Terms corresponding with the verb "relieve" were employed to indicate substantial or partial relief from feelings of anxiety or nervousness in all but one instance. These results correspond with the overall trend of reduced learner anxiety through exposure to

course activities.

Learner evaluation of course activities. *Classroom affordances* was the most prominent category emerging from the content analysis, which supports the notion that the curriculum played a significant role on helping to relieve learners'feelings of unease. In addition, mentions of specific classroom activities and other aspects of the curriculum comprised over 40% of the instances included in this category (see Table 2).

Terms related to the class and its activities were among the most commonly employed keywords from the corpus analysis as well, with terms referring to such activities employed in 68 individual responses. Table 5 displays the breakdown of these responses by category according to the corpus analysis.

Table 5. Student assessment of course activities

Category	Instances	Example
Course activities promoted learning	30	[R479] *Without the activities, I don't think that I would have spoken much.* [R497] *Engaging in pair work helped me better understand how to converse.*
Course activities promoted interpersonal relationships	22	[R333] *Through pair work we could understand one another.* [R607] *By doing the activities I could make friends with others.*
Course activities were interesting/ enjoyable	10	[R442] *It was enjoyable to talk with different people each class, and I was excited about who I would talk with in the next class.* [R448] *Conversation naturally developed from pair work, so it was a fun class to learn in.*
Course activities reduced anxiety	3	[R586] *By doing the pair work, etc., I was not nervous during the test and was able to speak.*
Course activities increased anxiety	3	[R59] *The activities were a source of nervousness.*

Note: R = respondent

Respondents most commonly considered course activities to be beneficial to the language learning process. This can also be seen in the prominence of the two *classroom affordances* subcategories of *opportunities to speak* (55 instances) and *communicate with others* (37 instances). As exemplified in the following responses, [R690] *Because of these activities, we have more opportunities to have conversations*, and [R58] *By communicating in English, I was able to communicate differently from Japanese, and I was able to communicate in various ways*, learners note that the curriculum and the classroom activities were central to the development of their speaking abilities, in addition to the role they played in helping to relieve anxiety.

Furthermore, and perhaps surprisingly, a significant number of responses indicated that pair work and group conversation activities were beneficial in promoting the growth of friendships and the formation of interpersonal bonds between classmates. That respondents perceived friendships as important to anxiety reduction is further illustrated by the frequency of the phrase "make friends with, get along with" (*nakayoku*), which appears a total of 32 times. The importance of this factor in easing anxiety can be seen in the results of the content analysis as well, where *interpersonal relationships* emerged as the third primary category with a total of 165 instances.

The role played by the activities in promoting learning and interpersonal relationships between classmates may also have contributed to evaluations of the curriculum as enjoyable and interesting, the third most frequent student assessment of the course according to the content analysis, with "enjoyable" and "interesting" mentioned in 70 instances, and no student responding that course materials were unenjoyable or uninteresting. Learner enjoyment of the course, and the role of this factor in reducing feelings of interactional anxiety, is underscored by the fact that enjoyment (91 mentions) is the most commonly mentioned subcategory of the *learner*

internal changes category in the content analysis as well.

Finally, although few in number, some respondents did indicate that the communication-based activities utilized in the course functioned to increase perceived feelings of unease. This is underscored by the content analysis, which found that a number of learners felt they had not become able to speak English (14 instances), or were unable to speak with their classmates (10). This indicates that despite the overall decreases in social anxiety, the curriculum and its requirements for a high degree of interaction may present a challenge for some learners.

Acclimation and opportunity. The terms "acclimation" (*nare*) and "opportunity" (*kikai*) were prominent in both forms of analysis. Among those responses in which students expressed the belief that they had experienced acclimation, the term was most frequently employed without indicating what students had acclimated to (e.g., R412: *I got used to it*.; R227: *Little by little I got used to it*.). Such responses counted for 18 of the total 38 responses. A further 12 responses specified that students believed they had acclimated to aspects of English conversation (e.g., R226: *I got used to beginning conversations*.; R345: *Through the speaking activities in the class, I got used to conversing*.). A third group of respondents indicated that class activities helped students get used to speaking with or working with each other (e.g., R653: *I got used to speaking with classmates*.; R361: *Through pair work I got to know people, and this especially helped to relieve anxiety*.). This last category of responses displays respondents' perception of the importance of interpersonal relationships and the role these relationships played in relieving anxiety.

Analysis of the term "opportunity" revealed that it appeared in 39 responses. The majority of responses (27) indicated that the opportunities perceived by students were opportunities to talk, speak, or otherwise engage in conversation (R398: *It was a good opportunity to speak*.; R478: *I could have*

opportunities to talk.). As mentioned above, *opportunities to speak* was the *classroom affordances* subcategory with the greatest number of mentions. These two corresponding results are not surprising as they are in line with the principal objective of the curriculum, i.e., to improve their communication skills by providing learners with numerous opportunities to engage in extended spoken interaction. However, unanticipated by the authors was a second group of respondents (12) who indicated that the curriculum afforded them opportunities to build interpersonal relationships (R590: *Because of increased opportunities to speak, I could make friends*.; R134: *I got the opportunity to speak with people I dont normally talk with*.). As with student acclimation, respondents indicated the opportunity to get to know other classmates as an additional benefit of the curriculum.

There was a broad congruence between the two forms analysis concerning learners' perceptions of the opportunities provided by the curriculum, however, one additional element appeared prominently in the content analysis. While many learners noted that the curriculum provided them with opportunities to speak or get to know others, a fair number of learners (13) noted that the course acted as motivation for them to speak and to develop relationships with their classmates. For these respondents, the structure of the course activities led them to take a more active stance. These respondents saw the curricular affordances not as passive opportunities, but as an impetus for their own engagement. For some this was motivation to engage in speaking (R264: *I'm nervous, but it's a good excuse to talk*.), or, for others, to engage with their classmates, or students with whom they might not normally speak (R272: *I think that the time set aside for pair work and such is set up was the spark to get involved with people from different departments*). This helps to underline the fact that the course and its activities lay behind other elements, such as the relationships that developed between learners or the sense of acclimation that many learners experienced,

and thus that the curriculum itself played a central role in helping to ease learners' perceptions of social anxiety.

4. Discussion

The present study, which forms one part of a larger study examining the effects of an interaction-centered English curriculum for first-year undergraduates on feelings of social anxiety, employed two forms of qualitative analysis to gain greater insight into student perceptions regarding aspects of the curriculum that Japanese learners from STEM majors reported as helpful in relieving social anxiety. The analyses presented in this paper support the overall conclusion that course activities played an important role in lowering learners' perceptions of social anxiety. In response to the question, *The pair work, conversations and other activities I do in English class help me to feel less anxious talking and interacting with my classmates*, an overwhelming number of respondents responded that the curriculum and its activities contributed to lessened feelings of anxiousness and nervousness. These findings are in line with the other two papers in the larger study (i.e., Ostman & Xethakis, 2020; Xethakis & Ostman, 2020), where respondents also reported a connection between the curriculum and their feelings of lessened anxiety.

The findings from both the corpus and the content analysis reveal a spectrum of learner experience, however, a sizable group of students reported that the curriculum had a considerable impact on their feelings of anxiety by promoting interpersonal relationships between classmates. Learners' frequent use of the terms "make friends with" and "get along with," as well as their repeated references to the potential of the activities to provide students with opportunities to get to know one another, indicates that respondents perceived relationship building as an important factor in reducing feelings of anxiety. This suggests that although opportunities to engage in conversation may have helped some learners

acclimate to the course, resulting in reduced anxiety, that may not be the case in regard to other learners.

For many learners, facilitating simple conversations allowed them to become familiar with one another through the exchange of personal information. Once they became comfortable with their conversation partners, learners were able to concentrate on developing their communicative abilities. According to this hypothesis, increased interpersonal familiarity played as significant a role in relieving learners' feelings of social anxiety as the classroom activities themselves did. Such an understanding indicates the need to focus on a new area of emphasis in helping to relieve interactional anxiety in the foreign language classroom: facilitating bonds of familiarity and friendship amongst learners.

This hypothesis is not entirely novel. The importance of creating a sense of positive non-judgmental regard, or acceptance, among learners to help deal with learner anxiety has been noted by King and Smith (2017), and more broadly by Ehrman and Dörnyei (1988) who called attention to the fact that learners need to feel comfortable with their peers before they will freely express themselves in the classroom. However, this paper is among the first to provide evidence for the efficacy of this approach in relation to feelings of social anxiety among Japanese English learners.

Encouraging learners to speak more is a common goal of oral communication classes, with educators generally evaluating performance based on output. A concentration on having learners speak more, or a belief in the capacity of increased speaking opportunities to reduce learner experience of stress, may conversely serve to exacerbate anxiety resulting from interactions with relative strangers. That these interactions are in English, may be expected to further increase such feelings of anxiety in some learners. Recognizing the importance of interpersonal relationships, and their positive effects in reducing learners' perceptions of social anxiety allows for a shift away from a more is better

approach in oral communication courses towards a focus, rather, on optimizing course activities to promote a sense of familiarity between learners. In other words, focusing on providing ample opportunities for learners to become familiar with one another may represent a more efficacious objective than a simple focus on learner output.

As noted in the first section of this paper, working with unfamiliar classmates can serve as a source of anxiety. One means by which this trigger can be reduced is, paradoxically, to compel learners to change seats and partners regularly during each class and continue this practice throughout the course. Ensuring that learners have the opportunity to speak with many different people in the class, and not just those in close proximity (who are most likely to be friends and acquaintances), not only provides greater and more varied opportunities to learners to interact, but also confers two further benefits.

First, compelling learners to work with unfamiliar others repeatedly, and ensuring that this is done on an impartial basis (i.e., all class members must work with all other class members), can provide opportunities for anxious learners to test out their expectation of a negative experience when interacting with others (Clark, 2001). With the majority of learners in this study, these repeated interactions helped them to realize that the experience was not as worrying as they originally feared. Obviously, this must be done with a degree of care and consideration. Teachers will have to keep a sharp eye on learner interactions and insert themselves when necessary in particular cases. Furthermore, this can be balanced by alternating this technique with allowing learners to work with their friends and acquaintances.

While this may prove difficult for learners at first, as many of the respondents in this study noted, they got used to it, got to know each other, and in many cases became friends. As Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) note, this kind of regular partner changing together with a high degree of interaction between learners and the sharing of personal information in order to learn about each other as much as possible, is a crucial factor for fostering relationships between class members. While purely anecdotal, one of the most surprising (and gratifying) things noticed by the first author in teaching the course was seeing students move from simply asking and answering questions as if performing an information-gap task at the beginning of the course to actually engaging with other in an actual conversation, replete with emotional responses and true interest on the part of both interlocutors.

The second benefit is that learners will come to understand that they have to speak with everyone in the class, even those they may not normally speak with. Compelling students to work with many different partners can bring with it a sense of commonality, that is to say that the students will begin to feel that they are in the same boat—as learners see that everyone will have to talk to everyone, they all see that no one will be left out or excluded, bringing everyone into the group. The kind of interaction that was encouraged in this course can thus also work to reduce the formation of in-group/ out-group distinctions among learners (King and Smith, 2017). A further means by which in-group/ out-group distinctions can be reduced is through activities, such as those featured in this curriculum, that develop interpersonal familiarity through the exchange of personal information. Doing so not only promotes mutual understanding, it also contributes to the discovery of shared similarities requisite for the formation of ingroup perception (Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2011).

Understanding the importance of ingroup-outgroup perception, the creation of a class-wide ingroup should become a curricular objective of communication classes focused on learner interaction such as this one. This task will involve drawing learner attention to areas in which they share similarities in lifestyle and experience. Admittedly, this task may vary in difficulty depending on the student body. In the case of this research, Japanese students entered the course with a

wealth of shared experiences (e.g., age, nationality, shared high-school experiences, etc.).

Finally, educators should be cognizant of those learners who struggle to achieve degrees of familiarity with other learners. Despite understanding curricular goals, they may be expected to continue to experience social anxiety even while others experience greater comfort in conversations with peers. Respondents in this research reported a variety of causes for their continued anxiety. Some referenced anxiety due to perceived inferiority compared with other learners (e.g., R24: *I felt extra anxiety because I could not speak English as well as those around me*). Another respondent indicated that differences in age produced anxiety (R241: *I felt anxious interacting with younger people*). Possessing an awareness of factors that can induce feelings of anxiety, educators can then work to limit the impact of these factors with particular learners by partnering them with learners who they have built bonds of familiarity with. The further exploration of these factors and their alleviation can server as the subject of future research in the impact of social anxiety on learners working in groups.

5. Conclusion

This study examined a number of factors that helped to ease feelings of social anxiety among Japanese English-language learners. The results revealed that serious consideration should be given to means of facilitating the formation of interpersonal relationships between learners when designing interaction-focused communication classes in order to reduce the impact of social anxiety. While forcing learners to interact with classmates who are initially unknown to them may create a small uptick in feelings of unease, repeated interactions can lead to the exchange of personal information, and a sense of familiarity. When this is done with a range of partners, help to create a sense of group cohesion, and the development of a class-wide ingroup. For this reason, the study not only contributes to the

literature on the role of social anxiety in group work settings, but also adds to the evidence on the importance of group dynamics in the language learning classroom.

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Appendix

Original Japanese for Keywords from Open-ended Question on Follow-up Survey

Term (s)	Instances
話す・話して・話した・話し・喋る・喋れる・喋れない	161
出来る・出来た・できる・できた・できて・できない・でき	92
相手・友達・クラスメート・クラスメイト・みんな・皆	73
楽しい・楽しさ・楽しく・楽しかった・楽しめた・楽しんで	70
会話	68
英語	62
不安・不安感	52
授業・クラス	44
機会	40
アクティビティ・アクディビティー・練習・活動	38
慣れる・慣れて・慣れた・なれる・なれて・慣れた・なれない	38
ペアワーク・ペア	34
仲良くなった・仲良くして・仲良くなれる・仲良し	32
感じ・感じる	27
多く・多い	25
やすく・やすい	25
増える・増えた・増えて	24
コミュニケーション	23
緊張	18
和らげる・和らげ・和らいで・緩和する・解ける	16