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*Research Note*

# Relationships Between Foreign Language Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate Among Japanese EFL Learners

SATOMI FUJII

Hokkaido University

Hokkaido, Japan

Corresponding author: satomi.321@outlook.jp

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## About the author

Satomi Fujii received her Ph. D. From Graduate School of International Media, Communication, and Tourism Studies, Hokkaido University, Japan. She has years of experience in teaching English at high school, vocational school and university. She is currently a researcher at Hokkaido University. Her research interests include language anxiety, willingness to communicate (WTC), individual factors, and EFL teaching.

## Abstract

Language learning can be stressful for learners when they are required to communicate with classmates using the target language. In such situations, high-anxious learners often feel frustrated compared to low-anxious learners. Feelings of language anxiety may obstruct learner's willingness to communicate (WTC). However, not many studies have elaborated on the straight-forward relationships between these two variables. Thus, this study seeks to ascertain: 1) the correlations between language anxiety and WTC, 2) the differences of WTC between high-anxious and low-anxious learners, and 3) learner willingness to use the four skills in English. A total of 145 university students participated in this study. The results indicate a significant negative correlation between language anxiety and WTC. The result of the *t*-test indicates significant differences in WTC scores between high-anxious and low-anxious learners. Thus, the negative relationships between language anxiety and WTC as well as a clear contrast in high- and low-anxious learners' WTC are established.

**Keywords:** Foreign language anxiety, Willingness to Communicate (WTC), Individual factors, Japanese EFL learners

## Introduction

Language anxiety is recognized as one of the important individual factors in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) studies. A large number of studies on language anxiety have discovered its negative influence on foreign language learning (*e.g.*, Fujii, 2018; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, Woodrow, 2006). Willingness to Communicate (WTC) is also one of the individual factors which have been of interest to foreign language teachers, as the ultimate goal of language classes is to enable learners to communicate in the target language. Language anxiety has long been viewed as a negative factor in language learning, while, on the other hand, WTC has been recognized as a positive factor (*e.g.*, Matsuoka, 2008; Rastegar & Karami, 2015). Therefore, these two individual factors can be considered as occupying opposite positions in foreign language learning.

WTC has recently been examined in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context in Japan. As Shimamura (2010) states, English education in Japan has been gradually shifting to a more practical communication-oriented focus. As with the recent changes in the guideline of Course of Study by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2017), more emphasis has been placed on developing learners' communicative competence. Communication-oriented classes are offered even in junior high or high schools as well as universities.

However, communicating in a foreign language can arouse anxiety. As Liu (2009) states, anxiety is closely related to learners' reticence. It is reported that the level of communication apprehension among Japanese is the highest compared with that of other Asian countries (Matsuoka & Evans, 2005). Thus, how to alleviate learners' anxiety when communicating in English is a crucial issue for EFL teachers in Japan.

Matsuoka (2008) further mentions that apprehension has been identified as the strongest factor in reduc-

ing Japanese college students' willingness to communicate in English. According to Woodrow (2006), anxiety in English communication is debilitating because it can negatively influence the learners' adaptation to the target language and the ultimate achievement of educational goals. To enhance Japanese learners' WTC, it is especially essential to reduce the level of learners' language anxiety in the English classroom. Rastegar and Karami (2015) explain that language anxiety and willingness to communicate are two decisive factors in learners' second language (L2) learning success. Teachers need to recognize language anxiety as a negative variable and WTC as a positive variable when setting up a communicative EFL classroom. Accordingly, these two variables can be interpreted as 'two sides of the same coin'.

## Literature Review

Language anxiety is defined as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second or foreign language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p.284). Previous studies have shown that anxious language learners identify communicating in a foreign language as one of the most frightening moments in language classrooms. In addition, as Woodrow (2006) states, giving oral presentations in front of large audiences using a foreign language can be an extremely anxious experience for such learners.

"Why are some learners willing to communicate in English, whilst others are reluctant to do so?" (Matsuoka & Evans, 2005, p.3). This is the question EFL teachers are extremely curious about when teaching English. EFL teachers have chances to encounter students with different personalities. It is therefore essential for them to take students' language anxiety, WTC, motivation and beliefs into consideration when teaching. WTC is defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with specific person or persons, using a second language" (MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei & Noels, 1998, p.547). It is an important concept related to learners' individual differences. Many researchers consider it a positive variable for language learners and agree that it must be facilitated as much as possible. However, Liu and Jackson (2008) argue that as a result of anxiety, English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) learners often choose to remain silent and are unwilling to communicate; then, because of their silence and unwillingness to speak the target language in class, they become more anxious. Language anxiety can be a debilitating factor in promoting learners' WTC.

There are several studies that examined the relationships between WTC and language anxiety. Alemi, Daftarifard and Pashmforoosh (2011) explore WTC and its interaction with language anxiety and language proficiency among Iranian EFL students. The interaction between WTC and anxiety is not found to be significant, but a negative correlation between anxiety and language proficiency is discovered. Rastegar and Karami (2015) investigated the relations among foreign language classroom anxiety, WTC, and scholastic success among Iranian EFL learners. They found a significant negative relationship between anxiety and WTC together with a significant positive relationship between WTC and scholastic success. Wu and Lin (2014) studied the relationship among foreign language anxiety, motivation, and WTC of Taiwanese students. Results showed that motivation is negatively related to anxiety. Anxiety is seen to be negatively related to

WTC, and partially mediated relationship between motivation and WTC. As we can see from the above, the relationship between language anxiety and WTC has been tested together with other variables. To date, a limited number of studies have examined the straightforward relationship between WTC and language anxiety. Moreover, results from previous studies still contain controversy over the relationship between WTC and language anxiety. Thus, this study attempts to fill this gap by investigating the direct relationship between these two variables in the Japanese context. As a hypothesis, it can be assumed that learner language anxiety and learner WTC are negatively correlated, the higher the language anxiety, the lower the WTC among learners. Accordingly, to ascertain the actual relationship between these two variables, this study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) Is there a correlation between language anxiety and WTC?
- 2) What is the difference in WTC between high-anxious and low-anxious learners?
- 3) Is there any difference in motivation between the high-anxious and low-anxious learners to make practical use of the four skills (speaking, writing, reading, and listening) when learning a target language?

## Methodology

### *Participants*

Participants in this study were 145 undergraduate students from two different universities in Japan, with ages ranging from 18 to 22. Two teachers, including the author, offered instructions to these students in two independent EFL classes in two universities. Students were required to conduct a large number of communicative tasks in both classes, and English was the only language used all the time in class. All the students speak Japanese as their native language and their English proficiency levels were between 500 and 785 points in TOEIC approximately.

### *Instruments*

In this study, three different scales are chosen as instruments, *e.g.* Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) from Horwitz *et al.* (1986), Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Scale from Peng and Woodrow (2010), and the scales which evaluate the learners' willingness to make practical use of the four skills in English: speaking, writing, reading, and listening. The third scale is the original scale proposed by the author, and is labeled as the Willingness to Use the Four Skill (WUFS) Scale, including questions such as "I like practicing speaking with my classmates and my teacher, as well as making presentations or discussing in English". The FLCAS consists of 33 items on a 5-point Likert scale. WTC scale consists of 10 items, and WUFS consists of 4 items, respectively. Both scales are established on a 6-point Likert scale. All the questionnaires were translated from English to Japanese, with the help of a native speaker of English who has lived in Japan for over 10 years. The whole survey was carried out during the academic year of 2018.

The data from University A were gathered in July 2018, and the Data from University B were gathered in October 2018. These data from the two universities were combined in order to conduct the analysis and draw a more general conclusion.

### *Data Analysis*

All the data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 22. Data obtained from this study were computed anonymously and were analyzed statistically. As explained above, all the questionnaire items in FLCAS were answered based on a five-point Likert scale and all the items in WTC and WUFS were answered on a six-point Likert scale. Firstly, Pearson's Correlation Analysis is carried out to see the correlations between learners' language anxiety and WTC, since the whole data followed a normal distribution. To figure out the differences between high-anxious and low-anxious learners, the total scores of the FLCAS were used. Statistical analysis is conducted for the data of FLCAS to calculate the mean, standard deviation, and median. Due to the median score, participants were divided into two groups: high-anxious and low-anxious groups. Based on the data in these two groups of learners, independent *t*-tests are performed to assess learners' WTC and willingness to make practical use of the four skills in English.

## **Results**

### *Reliability of the Scale Items*

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient is computed to see the reliability of all the scale items. There are three subcategories in the language anxiety scale (FLCAS; Horwitz *et al.*, 1986), and two subcategories in the WTC scale (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). As for the language anxiety scale (FLCAS; Horwitz *et al.*, 1986), the overall result shows a reliability of 0.92. Among the three subscales of language anxiety, the reliability is discovered as follows: communication apprehension:  $\alpha = 0.82$ ; test anxiety:  $\alpha = 0.85$ ; fear of negative evaluation:  $\alpha = 0.59$ . The second questionnaire, the WTC scale (Peng and Woodrow, 2010) indicates a good reliability estimate of 0.89. The results of the subscales are the follows: WTC in Meaning-focused activities:  $\alpha = 0.81$ ; WTC in Form-focused activities:  $\alpha = 0.93$ . The third questionnaire, WUFS, *i.e.*, the items related to learners' willingness to use the four skills of English, is found to have good reliability of 0.85. As a whole, the overall questionnaire items are proved to be most reliable.

### *Correlations Between Language Anxiety and WTC*

Table 1 shows the overall results of the correlations between language anxiety and WTC. Pearson's Correlation Analysis is carried out based on the learners' answers of these two scales. The three subcategories of language anxiety, communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluations, are found to have strong positive correlations between each other. As for the two subcategories of WTC, WTC in meaning-focused activities and WTC in form-focused activities, moderate positive correlations are dis-

covered. As shown in Table 1, the result suggests moderate negative correlations between willingness to communicate in meaning-focused activities and three subcategories of language anxiety. Besides, willingness to communicate in form-focused activities and the three sources of language anxiety are perceived to have weak but negative correlations. Although there are differences in the strength of correlations for each item, language anxiety and WTC are proven to be negatively correlated with each other. Thus, a conclusion is drawn that a negative relationship between language anxiety and WTC is observed from the correlational analysis.

### *Statistical Analysis of the Language Anxiety Scale*

Table 2 shows the statistical analysis of the FLCAS, the language anxiety scale. This is a 5-point Likert scale which consists of 33 items, so the total scores range from a minimum of 33 to a maximum of 165. In this study, the mean score is 101.68, with the minimum score of 47 and the maximum score of 154. Since the median score is 102, this score is used as a cut-off point. According to the anxiety levels, the participants were divided into two groups, low-anxious and high-anxious groups. Among the total of 145 learners, 84 of them are low-anxious and 61 are high-anxious (see Table 3). These two groups of learners, low-anxious and high-anxious learners, are compared individually according to the answers of the WTC scale and scales about their willingness to use the four skills of English.

Table 1 Correlations Between Language Anxiety Factors and WTC Factors

|                                     | Communication<br>Apprehension | Test Anxiety | Fear of<br>Negative<br>Evaluation | WTC1<br>Meaning-<br>focused<br>activities | WTC2<br>Form-<br>focused<br>activities |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Communication<br>Apprehension       | -                             | .784**       | .758**                            | -.352**                                   | -.177*                                 |
| Test Anxiety                        |                               | -            | .739**                            | -.424**                                   | -.205*                                 |
| Fear of Negative<br>Evaluation      |                               |              | -                                 | -.323**                                   | -.183*                                 |
| WTC1 Meaning-<br>focused activities |                               |              |                                   | -                                         | .538**                                 |
| WTC2 Form-<br>focused activities    |                               |              |                                   |                                           | -                                      |

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

Table 2 Statistical Analysis of the FLCAS (Language Anxiety)

| <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Minimum | Median | Maximum |
|----------|-----------|---------|--------|---------|
| 101.68   | 21.32     | 47      | 102    | 154     |

Table 3 Groups According to the Anxiety Levels

| Low-anxious | High-anxious | Total |
|-------------|--------------|-------|
| 84          | 61           | 145   |

Table 4 Willingness to Communicate Among High-anxious and Low-anxious Learners

|               | Low-anxious |           | High-anxious |           | <i>t</i> -value |
|---------------|-------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|-----------------|
|               | <i>M</i>    | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>     | <i>SD</i> |                 |
| WTC1          | 3.04        | 0.98      | 2.36         | 0.80      | 4.41***         |
| WTC2          | 3.99        | 1.30      | 3.73         | 1.40      | 1.18            |
| WTC (Overall) | 3.42        | 0.97      | 2.91         | 0.91      | 3.20**          |

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

(WTC1= *Meaning-focused activities*, WTC2= *Form-focused activities*)

### *Comparison of High-anxious and Low-anxious Learners' Willingness to Communicate*

Table 4 shows the results of the independent *t*-tests which explain the high-anxious and low-anxious learners' willingness to communicate. As in this table, the mean score of WTC in meaning-focused activities is 3.04 (SD= 0.98) among low-anxious learners, but the mean score among high-anxious learners is 2.36 (SD= 0.80). Thus, conclusions can be made that there is a significant difference between these two groups of learners ( $t= 4.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ). On the other hand, the mean score of WTC in form-focused activities is 3.99 (SD= 1.30) among low-anxious learners and, the mean score among high-anxious learners is 3.73 (SD= 1.40). Though there is a slight difference between the two groups of learners, the *t*-value isn't significant. When we take a look at the results of overall WTC, the mean score is 3.42 (SD= 0.97) among low-anxious learners, but the mean score of the high-anxious learners is 2.91 (SD= 0.91). Accordingly, the low-anxious learners' overall WTC scores are significantly higher than those of the high-anxious learners ( $t= 3.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This result indicates that the low-anxious learners tend to have higher willingness in communicative activities compared to the high-anxious learners.

### *High-anxious and Low-anxious Learners' Willingness to Use the Four Skills*

Table 5 demonstrates the results of the independent *t*-tests which clarified the difference in the willingness of the learners in the high-anxious and low-anxious groups to use the four skills. According to Table 5,

Table 5 Willingness to Use the Four Skills Among High-anxious and Low-anxious Learners

|                       | Low-anxious |           | High-anxious |           | <i>t</i> -value |
|-----------------------|-------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|-----------------|
|                       | <i>M</i>    | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>     | <i>SD</i> |                 |
| Speaking              | 3.18        | 1.42      | 2.44         | 1.26      | 3.24**          |
| Writing               | 3.24        | 1.43      | 2.67         | 1.22      | 2.50*           |
| Reading               | 3.35        | 1.48      | 2.93         | 1.45      | 1.67            |
| Listening             | 3.50        | 1.43      | 2.97         | 1.33      | 2.31*           |
| Four Skills (Overall) | 3.32        | 1.21      | 2.75         | 1.04      | 2.93**          |

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ 

the mean scores of the low-anxious learners are significantly higher than those of the high-anxious learners in their willingness to engage in speaking ( $t = 3.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ), writing ( $t = 2.50$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and listening ( $t = 2.31$ ,  $p < .05$ ) activities. Significant differences are perceived in all these three skills except reading between the two groups of learners. As a whole, there are significant differences between the low-anxious and the high-anxious learners in their willingness to use the overall four skills ( $t = 2.93$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Due to this result, low-anxious learners are found to be more willing to get involved in activities to enhance their four skills in English than the high-anxious learners. As a reason for this, it can be assumed that low-anxious learners are more accustomed to the practical use of the English language compared to high-anxious learners. Anyhow, language anxiety may disrupt learners' willingness to communicate in English.

## Discussion

The current study attempts to elaborate on the direct relationship between Japanese EFL learners' language anxiety and their willingness to communicate (WTC). A clear tendency is observed by looking at the results of correlational analysis and independent  $t$ -tests.

RQ1 of the hypothesis asks: "Is there a correlation between language anxiety and WTC?" According to the results of Pearson's Correlation Analysis, there are significant moderate or weak negative correlations between language anxiety and WTC. Especially, WTC in meaning-focused activities shows a moderate negative correlation with language anxiety. WTC had a weak but negative correlation with language anxiety in form-focused activities. Meaning-focused activities are, for example, role-plays and spontaneous speaking activities, where the focus is on getting someone else to understand what we mean. What can be seen in these results is the lower the learner anxiety, the higher the learner WTC. This inclination is especially true with WTC in meaning-focused activities. On the other hand, form-focused activities are effective in training of speaking and understanding the new language forms by using grammatical structures to make correct sentences. Among these two types of activities, the former suggests more possibility of free communication in class and therefore might evoke more anxiety in learners. In other words, meaning-focused activities may induce more anxiety compared to form-focused activities in the English classroom. This might be the

reason for the stronger negative correlation of WTC with language anxiety in meaning-focused activities than form-focused activities.

RQ2 of the hypothesis is, “What is the differences in WTC between high-anxious and low-anxious learners?” The independent *t*-test shows that low-anxious learners had significantly higher WTC than high-anxious learners in this study, which suggests that low-anxious learners are more motivated to communicate than high-anxious learners. This major finding is consistent with Algahali’s (2016) study that confirms the negative relationship between learners’ anxiety in a foreign language classroom and their WTC. In addition, there are significant differences in meaning-focused activities between the two groups of learners in WTC, but no significant differences in form-focused activities. According to these findings, a conclusion can be drawn that high anxious learners are not willing to engage in meaning-focused activities compared to low-anxious learners. There is a notable difference between high-anxious and low-anxious learners’ desire to communicate.

RQ3 of the hypothesis asks, “Is there any difference in motivation between the high-anxious and low-anxious learners to make practical use of the four-skills (speaking, writing, reading, and listening) when learning a target language?” According to the result of the independent *t*-test, there are significant differences in the degree of anxiety and willingness to use the four skills in English between the two groups. That is, low-anxious learners score significantly higher in their willingness to use the overall English skills than high-anxious learners, especially in the items of speaking, writing and listening. However, the item of reading skill does not show a significant difference. This implies that reading seems to be less-stressful to learners compared to the other three skills. As Saito, Horwitz and Garza (1999) contend, foreign language reading anxiety is a construct that is distinct from general foreign language anxiety. Pae (2013) addresses that teachers should give balanced attention to each of the four skill-based anxieties (speaking, writing, listening and reading anxieties) since his research findings evidence an independent relationship among the four-skill-based anxieties. Accordingly, learners’ anxious feelings can have a steady influence on their willingness to make practical use of the English language, thus teachers should keep this in mind when making plans of communicative activities in class.

## Conclusion

This exploratory study examines the straight-forward relationship between language anxiety and willingness to communicate (WTC) among Japanese EFL learners and leads to interesting and profound results. Findings reveal that negative correlation exists between language anxiety and WTC. Since low-anxious learners are more willing to communicate, we can see the importance of alleviating learners’ language anxiety in order to raise their desire to communicate. Moreover, low-anxious learners are more willing to speak, write and listen in English learning compared to high-anxious learners. This result suggests the fact that communicating in English would be a lot easier if it were not for anxious feelings. As Matsuoka (2008) mentions, it may be possible to reduce learner anxiety and enhance the level of WTC if learners could use the language in a manner appropriate to their attitudes and aptitudes. That is, language anxiety should be lessened as much

as possible in order to promote learner WTC in the English classroom. Strategies for increasing WTC and reducing anxiety are essential in language learning and communication, and teachers should help learners become more active and confident in the classroom (Liu and Jackson, 2008). As communicative English teaching is called for in Japan in recent years, it is of crucial significance to think about ways to raise learners' WTC in a less-stressful classroom atmosphere.

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**Appendix A- Questionnaire Items of the WTC Scale (Peng & Woodrow, 2010)**

|    |                                                                                                                            |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | I am willing to do a role-play in English at my desk with my peer ( <i>e.g.</i> , ordering food in a restaurant).          |
| 2  | I am willing to ask the teacher in English to repeat what he/she just said in English because I didn' t understand.        |
| 3  | I am willing to give a short speech in English to the class about my hometown with notes.                                  |
| 4  | I am willing to do a role-play standing in front of the class in English ( <i>e.g.</i> , ordering food in a restaurant).   |
| 5  | I am willing to ask my group mates in English how to pronounce a word in English.                                          |
| 6  | I am willing to ask my peer sitting next to me in English how to say an English phrase to express the thoughts in my mind. |
| 7  | I am willing to ask my group mates in English the meaning of word I do not know.                                           |
| 8  | I am willing to ask my peer sitting next to me in English the meaning of an English word.                                  |
| 9  | I am willing to give a short self-introduction without notes in English to the class.                                      |
| 10 | I am willing to translate a spoken utterance from Japanese into English in my group.                                       |

*Notes:*

Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10 are WTC in meaning-focused activities (WTC-1), and items 5, 6, 7, 8, are WTC in form-focused activities (WTC-2). The original statement in item 10, “utterance from Chinese into English” is changed to “utterance from Japanese into English” in order to fit the context of the current study.

**Questionnaire Items of Willingness to Use the Four Skill (WUFS) Scale**

|   |                                                                                                                                         |
|---|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | I like practicing speaking with my classmates and my teacher, as well as having presentations or discussions using English. (Speaking). |
| 2 | I like writing sentences or short paragraphs in English. (Writing)                                                                      |
| 3 | I like reading English columns or English books. (Reading)                                                                              |
| 4 | I like listening to English speeches, dialogues or doing any other listening activities. (Listening)                                    |