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Foreign Language Anxiety in the Case of Croatian University Learners of Japanese: Implications for Speaking Activity Design

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ABSTRACT

The aims of this study are (1) to investigate the frequency, sources, and characteristics of foreign language anxiety regarding speaking activities in the case of learners of the Japanese language at two Croatian institutions of higher education, and (2) to determine which speaking activities anxious learners of Japanese in Croatia would willingly participate in, while remaining sufficiently challenged by the tasks to gain new or reinforce previously acquired linguistic knowledge. A questionnaire was distributed to 65 students at the University of Pula bachelor's program in Japanese language and culture and the University of Zagreb's Japanese studies program in February and March of 2018. The results point to lower than expected self-assessment of Japanese speaking competence and high levels of Japanese speaking anxiety, particularly due to the fear of making mistakes, the presence of other individuals relevant to the learning process (classmates, teachers, other native speakers of Japanese), and a lack of activities focused on meaningful interaction. Participant experiences with various learning methods point to their willingness to participate in non-structured, improvisational pair conversation exercises and the potential of these activities to help learners overcome debilitating language anxiety.

Keywords: Japanese language learning, Croatian higher education, foreign language anxiety, speaking activities, interaction, fear of making mistakes, focus on meaning, activity design

1. INTRODUCTION

Research into foreign language anxiety (henceforth abbreviated as FLA) in the field of foreign language education has been steadily accumulating since as early as the 1980s, when it was tentatively identified by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (1986: 128). In their seminal publication entitled “Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety”, they define FLA as a phenomenon characterized by feelings of “apprehension, worry, even dread... difficulty concentrating, becom[ing] forgetful, sweat[ing]” as well as “avoidance behavior such as missing class and postponing homework” (127), mostly associated with listening and speaking a foreign language (further abbreviated as FL). They linked it to three types of performance anxiety: communication apprehension (aggravated by the fact that learners are expected to communicate with limited language ability), test anxiety (exacerbated by the high frequency of testing in language learning programs) and fear of negative evaluation (by the teacher, whose language abilities are almost inevitably superior to those of the language learner, and by their peers, often perceived as competitors in a language proficiency hierarchy) (127). Rather than being a simple amalgamation of these three anxieties, Horwitz and associates also note the additional factors of challenges to the learners’ self-esteem posed by their insufficient ability to establish meaningful communication, combined with the difficulties of manoeuvring in a different culture (128).

Despite an abundance of research on the subject, many educators with limited time for the perusal of scholarly articles remain justifiably unacquainted with the particulars of FLA. They tend to differ in their perceptions of its prevalence, underestimate its strength, or believe that it is limited to testing (Tran 2013: 216, 230, 237-238), and are therefore likely to be ill-equipped to help students affected by this problem. Nonetheless, they do report being aware of the fact that some students may feel apprehensive, tense, or even afraid to participate in certain in-class activities, particularly speaking ones, and that they are, as Horwitz notes, only able to express “limited selves” in the foreign language in question (Horwitz 1986: 128). This may lead to problems with language use and avoidance behavior which can be detrimental to their success and motivation for further learning (Liu & Jackson 2008: 82).

The aim of the present study is twofold. First, the author explores foreign language anxiety in the case of learners of Japanese studying at two higher education institutions in Croatia. The focus on speaking skills is due to an observed discrepancy between comprehension levels and the

students' ability to express themselves in Japanese, as well as the importance of speaking proficiency for their post-graduation career prospects, as those planning to remain in Croatia are most likely to work in the tourism sector. Second, it is to find out which in-class speaking activities even anxious students would willingly participate in, which are also sufficiently challenging to contribute to the learning process. These activities are not meant to be as anxiety-free as possible; they would instead ideally take place in a kind of middle ground where anxiety becomes facilitating, enabling students to make better use of the knowledge they have accumulated in the course of their study, thereby pushing the limits of their ability to express themselves in the Japanese language.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Much research has been dedicated to uncovering the characteristics, sources and effects of FLA. It has been variously defined as a feeling ranging from discomfort and worry to apprehension and fear associated with various activities indispensable for FL learning, especially speaking (Liu & Jackson 2008: 71; Kitano 2001: 553) and tests (Phillips 1991: 4; Phillips 1992: 18-19; Hewitt & Stephenson 2012: 180). Initial disagreement over what came first – language learning difficulties or language anxiety (Sparks & Ganschow 1995: 235; MacIntyre 1995: 95-96; Horwitz 2000: 258) – gradually developed into an understanding of the cyclical nature of the process. Anxiety and motivation issues can be caused by the manifold difficulties inherent to the learning process (Sparks & Ganschow 1995: 235), but they may also exacerbate these difficulties (MacIntyre et al. 1997: 280), e.g. by causing students to “go blank”, become distracted, or forget what they already know (Phillips 1992: 19).

Commonly listed sources of FLA include insufficient grammar and/or vocabulary knowledge, fear of speaking in front of others and being unfavourably compared with them, unwillingness to make mistakes (Williams & Andrade 2008: 185), problems in learner and instructor interaction, beliefs about language learning, and certain classroom procedures (Young 1991: 427). Furthermore, the number of hours required to reach the same level of proficiency in Japanese is often estimated to be higher than that for European languages (Aida 1994: 155). FLA also appears particularly strong in places where students have little contact with other speakers of the language in question (Liu & Jackson 2008: 80). It has been noted to happen even to high ability students (Phillips 1991: 3) and those willing to engage in conversation (Horwitz et al. 1986: 127).

Students also appear to be notoriously poor at estimating their own proficiency. MacIntyre and colleagues combined an anxiety assessment

tool with a proficiency test, demonstrating that the anxious students who participated in their survey *underestimate*, while non-anxious ones *overestimate* their language proficiency (1997: 266). Liu and Jackson note the self-fulfilling prophecy engendered by these perceptions, where students doubtful of their language abilities put less effort into studying, which further hampers their progress (2008: 82). FLA levels appear to be associated with willingness to communicate in the FL, self-rated proficiency and fear of negative evaluation in the case of learners of Japanese in Kitano (2001: 549, especially advanced learners) and Aida (1994: 162), as well as English in Liu and Jackson (2008: 82).

This cycle of anxiety negatively affecting performance, combined with perceptions of performative failure causing further anxiety, often leads to avoidance of situations where one is prompted to communicate, for example by being silent in class, skipping class entirely, or using another language to speak to teachers or other acquaintances (Horwitz et al. 1986: 130). Avoidance behavior decreases the opportunities to improve in practice and to reassess one's performance (MacIntyre et al. 1997: 278-279), and further "reinforces the perception of incompetence" (Foss & Reitzel 1988: 442). FLA has been thought to have a negative effect on learner self-perception as well (Horwitz et al. 1986: 128; Foss & Reitzel 1988: 440; Phillips 1991: 3) due to the inability to "present oneself in a way consistent with one's self-image" (Foss & Reitzel 1988: 440).

To counter the negative effects of FLA, many researchers suggest introducing activities where students reflect on their performance, thereby adopting more realistic views of the learning process and their progress (Foss & Reitzel 1988: 449; Phillips 1991: 5-7; Phillips 1992: 20; Liu & Jackson 2008: 82). Students whose language anxiety correlates with perfectionism (Gregersen & Horwitz 2002: 563 and 566-568) could benefit from being encouraged to attach less importance to mistakes, which are an inevitable part of learning (Phillips 1991: 3). One way to do this is to divert learner focus from accuracy of form to conveying meaning. Williams and Andrade note that activities to which learners can personally relate generate less anxiety and more comfort (2008: 187). This is especially important if the goal of FL study is to enable learners to "reinvent themselves in the target language" (Spielmann & Radnofsky 2001: 259, 273), rather than merely acquire technical skills.

Introducing interactive and cooperative activities in pairs or small groups (Phillips 1991: 7), letting learners design them by themselves (Williams & Andrade 2008: 187) and giving overt instruction not to worry about accuracy of form might be a good starting point. These are by no means anxiety-free activities, but one aim could be precisely to reduce anxiety levels to levels thought of as natural or conducive to studying more, i.e. facilitating rather than debilitating anxiety (Hewitt & Stephenson 2012: 170-172; Tran

2013: 233 and 235), or the kind of energizing tension Spielmann & Radnofsky call “flow” (2001: 273-4). Modifying curricula to give learners time to be creative, rather than overwhelming them with tasks focused on accuracy of form and the accumulation of knowledge, may also increase interest and motivation (Young 1991: 434), as well as the enjoyment learners derive from their studies.

3. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Despite Croatia’s distance from Japan and the very limited opportunities for communication in Japanese in everyday life, interest in Japan and the Japanese language has been steadily increasing in the past couple of decades, especially in higher education. The Juraj Dobrila University of Pula offers a 3-year-long bachelor’s program in Japanese language and culture, and will welcome its 5th generation of students in October of 2019. The University of Zagreb has been providing a 3-year-long “free study” program in Japanese studies for a little over a decade, with plans to expand to a bachelor’s program in the future. Language classes are taught by both native and non-native speakers of Japanese.

Students in Pula attend an average of 6 x 90 minutes of Japanese language-related classes per week. Students in Zagreb attend 4 x 90 minutes. In-class speaking activities in both programs centre around answering the teacher’s questions, conversation roleplay in pairs, and making presentations. Students of both universities face the challenge of becoming able to utilize the enormous amount of new vocabulary and grammar they absorb in a short time in a country where opportunities for learners to apply and reinforce what they have learned outside of class are very hard to come by, at least before entering the job market.

Some extracurricular speaking activities are provided by both programs, and student experiences with these are included in the scope of this study. At the time the data was collected, this included 6 x 90-minute sessions of pair interview activities at the University of Pula, where pairs of students were provided with lists of interview questions similar to those used in Kauzlaric (2016: 82) and instructed to use them as starting points for conversation. The Japanese studies program in Zagreb organizes monthly informal get-togethers where students are able to practice non-structured Japanese conversation with their teachers and (other) native speakers of Japanese (volunteers residing in or visiting Zagreb).

The author’s interest in the exploration of FL speaking anxiety in the case of learners of Japanese in Croatia stems from teaching experience at the aforementioned universities – both in and out of the classroom. Casual and intentional student observation revealed that many students feel nervous or

afraid to speak up during in-class activities or remain silent in speaking classes, switch to English when the opportunity for conversation with native speakers arises during informal get-togethers out of class, or do not attend these at all. The author's previous investigation into FLA in the case of students from the University of Zagreb (Kauzlarić 2016) revealed frequent feelings of anxiety regarding studying Japanese (approximately 41.18% of students reported that they feel it often or always, while 29.41% sometimes feel it), especially related to grammar, vocabulary, politeness levels, language errors and lack of linguistic knowledge, as well as low self-assessment of their speaking ability. The following study is an expansion of the previous one, including learners of Japanese at the University of Pula, and with a greater focus on hints provided by the students themselves as to which speaking activities they perceive to be the most beneficial.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHOD

Two questions were posed to meet the goals of the present study:

Research question 1: Do learners of the Japanese language at the universities of Pula and Zagreb experience foreign language anxiety when it comes to speaking Japanese? If the answer is yes, how often and what are its sources and characteristics?

Research question 2: Which speaking activities would be sufficiently engaging for both anxious and non-anxious students to willingly partake in, which are challenging enough to increase their speaking proficiency?

In February and March of 2018, 40 students from the University of Pula and 25 students from the University of Zagreb participated in a computerized online survey conducted in Croatian, based on a questionnaire administered to 34 students from the University of Zagreb in February and March of 2016 (Kauzlarić 2016: 58). The 2016 questionnaire was expanded to include questions concerning extracurricular speaking activities offered by both programs. The 2018 questionnaire covered the following areas (Table 1):

Table 1. Questionnaire content in addition to participant background

No.	Questionnaire areas
1	list of all foreign languages studied so far and their learning methods, as well as proficiency self-assessment per language
2	frequency, sources and levels of Japanese language anxiety experienced in various situations, and its general characteristics
3	language learning beliefs
4	student experiences with and perceptions of various language learning activities (for all foreign languages studied so far, including Japanese)
5	student impressions of their performance during extracurricular speaking activities and benefits of the activities

Most University of Pula students were between 18 and 21 years of age (70%) at the time of the survey, while most Zagreb students (60%) were somewhat older (between 22 and 25 years). This is due to the fact that the Japanese study program in Pula is a bachelor's program, while the one in Zagreb is a three-year-long language program open to students enrolled into at least the 3rd year of any other bachelor's program offered by the University of Zagreb, or who hold a degree from another Croatian university. At the moment, no university in Croatia offers a master's degree in Japanese language and most bachelor's programs in Croatia last 3 years. Figure 1 below shows the yearly distribution of survey participants for both universities. Gender ratio-wise, 72.5% of Pula University participants were female and 27.5% male, while the ratios for Zagreb were slightly more balanced, with 60% female students and 40% male students.

The average number of foreign languages ever studied per person is a high 4.75 for Pula and 5.2 for Zagreb, including English (mandatory during compulsory education) and Japanese. This, however, also includes various languages chosen as elective subjects at school and university, studied in language schools or at home as a hobby, where proficiency levels could be negligible. Only 12.5% of Pula students study another foreign language in a double-major or major-minor combination with Japanese, with 44% of Zagreb students majoring in one or two languages other than Japanese. As many as 62.5% of Pula students who participated in the survey are currently majoring only in Japanese. Almost two thirds (70%) of the participants in Pula have spent less than 25 hours learning Japanese prior to enrolling compared to around half (48%) of Zagreb ones. Few have spent any time in Japan (3 out of 40 students in Pula and 5 out of 20 in Zagreb).

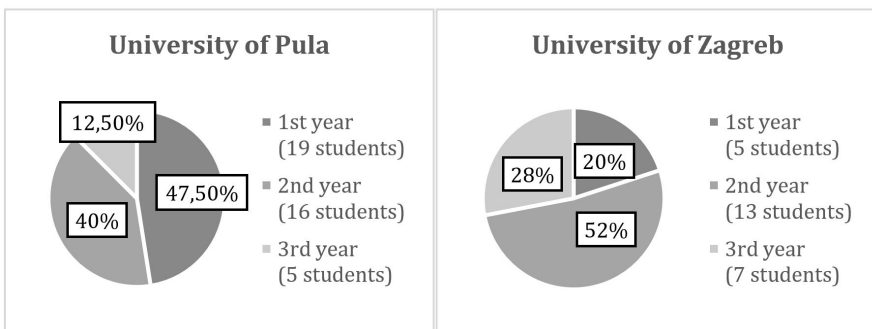


Figure 1. Participant distribution according to year of study

The participants were requested to assign a self-assessed speaking proficiency rating to all foreign languages they have studied so far according to a scale created for the author's 2016 study and based on The Japan Foundation's *JF Standard for Japanese-Language Education 2010 User Handbook (Third Edition)* (2010), presented in Table 2 below.

The ratings were unsurprisingly high when it came to the English language with an overall 5.45 in Pula and 5.76 in Zagreb. For Japanese, on the other hand, the speaking proficiency self-assessment score was fairly low for each year, with some interesting variations, as shown in Table 3.

Table 2. Speaking proficiency self-assessment scale

Rating	Description
1	<i>I can use previously memorized phrases and sentences to greet someone, introduce myself and give basic information. I can understand a very limited amount of content related to topics I am well acquainted with, and answer simple questions.</i>
2	<i>With previous preparation, I can give a simple description of my family, my education, my job etc. I can understand and answer simple questions in the course of a conversation, but I cannot control the conversation flow on my own.</i>
3	<i>I can describe my own experience, events, opinions and impressions using a limited amount of expressions. Without previous preparation, I can usually talk about everyday life or a topic I am well-acquainted with.</i>
4	<i>The influence of my mother tongue can still be felt and I do make mistakes, but I can give a detailed presentation on a topic from a field I am interested in, and express my own opinion. I can participate in long, complex conversations.</i>
5	<i>I can express myself naturally. Even if I do make mistakes, they do not affect whether people will understand me. I can adjust the use of formal and informal expressions to the circumstances of the conversation.</i>
6	<i>I can give my own opinion on a wide array of content including concrete and abstract topics with clear explanations of the bases for my opinion. I can use idiomatic expressions and slang without difficulty, convey and understand subtle nuances and communicate without mistakes.</i>

Table 3. Participant Japanese language proficiency self-assessment

Questionnaire	Year	Rating	Questionnaire	Year	Rating
University of Pula 2018	1 st	2.2	University of Zagreb 2018	1 st	3.6
	2 nd	2.87		2 nd	2.45
	3 rd	2.55		3 rd	3.35

Both ratings closest to the average values – 2 and 3 – are appropriate for 1st and 2nd year students, while 3rd year students would be expected to reach level 4 given the amount of hours of study. The 3rd year student proficiency self-assessment in Pula (2.55) is lower than the 2nd (2.87), while the 1st year proficiency self-assessment in Zagreb (3.6) is higher than both the 2nd (2.45) and the 3rd (3.35), but this may be due to the very limited number of third-year students in Pula and first-year students in Zagreb who participated in the survey (5 in both cases). An interesting thing to note is that third-year students in Zagreb rated their speaking proficiency as 2.67 in 2016 (Kauzlarić 2016: 59) and 3.35 in 2018, which represents a somewhat significant increase (0.68), but remains below the level expected given their year of study.

5. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Both multiple-choice and open-ended questions about the students' experience with Japanese language speaking anxiety were used in the questionnaire. Figure 2 on the following page displays the distribution of answers to a general 5-point Likert scale question about experiencing FLA symptoms for both Pula and Zagreb in 2018, as well as Zagreb in 2016.

Students who answered that they “often” or “always” feel uncomfortable, nervous or worried about studying Japanese make up 35% in Pula and 28% in Zagreb. When combined with those who stated they “sometimes” feel this way, the percentage of students who answered positively to this question was 87.5% for Pula and 72% for Zagreb, similar to 70.79% in 2016. Only 5 out of 40 students in Pula replied negatively in 2018 (1 student = never, 4 students = rarely).

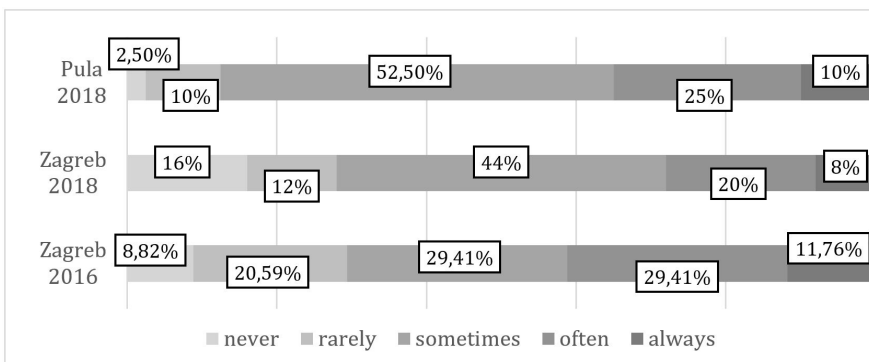


Figure 2. Answers to the question “Do you or have you ever felt uncomfortable, nervous or worried about studying Japanese?”

General FLA frequency levels in Pula (Table 4) were highest in the third-year (average score 4) followed by the first-year (3.26) and second-year (3.13), with an overall average of 3.3, mostly surpassing those in Zagreb (first-year = 2.4, second-year = 3.15, third-year = 2.85, overall 2.92).

Table 4. Frequency of experiencing FLA from 1 (never) to 5 (always)

	first-year	second-year	third-year	total
Pula 2018	3.26	3.13	4	3.3
Zagreb 2018	2.4	3.15	2.85	2.92
Zagreb 2016	2.65	3.55	3.83	3.15

On the same 5-point scale (Figure 3 on the following page), students of both universities stated that they feel similarly uncomfortable, nervous or worried about grammar when using Japanese (Pula 3.2 and Zagreb 3.24), with 40% in Pula and 44% in Zagreb stating that they often or always worry about it. More students from Pula (67.5%) appear to often or always worry about vocabulary than students from Zagreb (48%), although the figures for Zagreb are high as well. This may be due to the greater amount of material covered in Pula, especially vocabulary (but grammar as well).

Pronunciation, on the other hand, seems to trouble students from Zagreb more than students from Pula, with 32% worrying about it often or always in Zagreb and nearly half of that (17.5%) in Pula. In Zagreb, 44% of students often or always worry about distinguishing between politeness levels in Japanese, with 32.5% in Pula, which does offer courses focusing on honorific speech (particularly that used in the tourism industry).

Figure 4 below displays student answers to questions concerning the presence of other individuals relevant to the learning process – educators, other learners and native speakers outside the formal learning environment.

As many as 75% of students from Pula and 56% of students from Zagreb stated that they mostly or entirely agree with the statement “I feel nervous when I speak Japanese with my professor in the classroom”. This feeling is strongest for first- and second-year students in Pula and may be related to classroom sizes reaching as many as 50 students in the first year. The percentage of students who feel this way when speaking Japanese in class due to the presence of other students are 67.5% in Pula and 40% in Zagreb. The percentage of students who feel this way when speaking

Japanese with native speakers outside the classroom are also a high 67.5% in Pula and 60% in Zagreb. Pair work, on the other hand, seems to be a less stressful activity, with only 25% of students in Pula and 24% of students in Zagreb stating that it mostly or entirely makes them nervous. The same applies to small group activities with 32.5% for Pula and 24% for Zagreb.

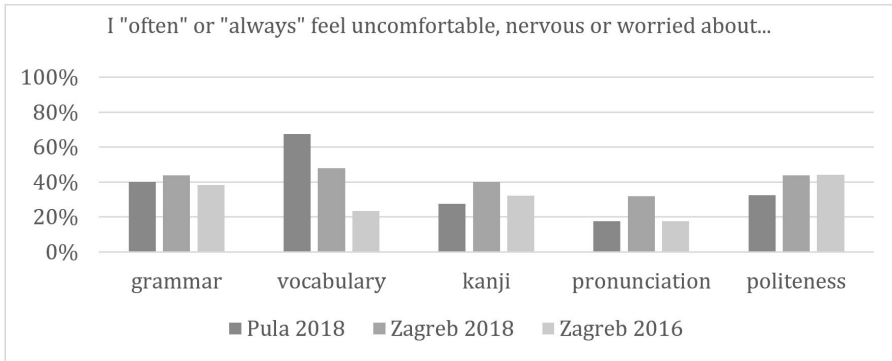


Figure 3. Frequency of FLA symptoms experienced regarding five major linguistic aspects of learning Japanese

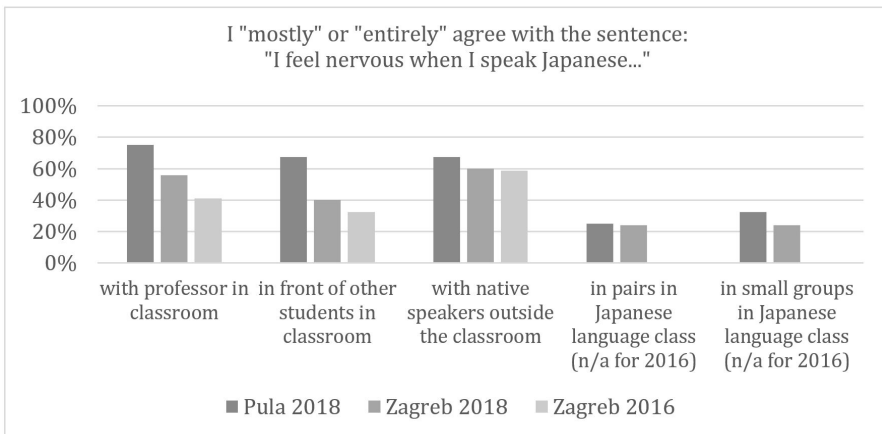


Figure 4. Frequency of experiencing FLA regarding the presence of other individuals relevant to the learning process

As far as symptoms of language anxiety go, 70% of students from Pula and 56% of students from Zagreb reported in 2018 that they often forget to use linguistic items they already know due to excessive nervousness, or “freeze” and become unable to continue speaking. Many also worry that making mistakes will cause their interlocutors to not understand them (70% in Pula and 60% in Zagreb), and that this will lead to other people regarding them as incompetent (65% in Pula and 52% in Zagreb).

Participants were given space to freely elaborate on their personal experience with FLA. The causes of FLA most commonly listed by those participants who stated they do feel uncomfortable, nervous or worried about Japanese study to some degree include the following (Table 5, not in order of frequency):

Table 5. FLA causes most frequently listed by anxious participants

No.	Questionnaire area
1	fear of making mistakes / forgetting what they already know / freezing up
2	lack of knowledge / feeling overwhelmed by the amount of knowledge necessary to reach advanced levels (especially vocabulary) / feeling that they are progressing very slowly
3	lack of study time
4	the presence of other people (other students or native speakers).

Speaking activities were persistently listed as those during which these feelings are the strongest. Despite these self-reported difficulties, 76% of students in Zagreb stated that they enjoy speaking Japanese. That number is slightly lower in Pula (52.5%), with only 15% stating that they do not enjoy it, and 32.5% unable to decide, possibly due to the fact that the majority of survey participants in Pula were first-year students (47.5%) who had just finished their first semester, and presumably have little practice doing so. As for losing the will to communicate in Japanese when they are unable to express themselves as well as in other languages, the answers are mostly evenly balanced between those who do lose the will to do so (45% in Pula and 36% in Zagreb) and those who do not (40% in Pula and 48% in Zagreb).

Students in Pula believed the that influence of their own efforts on their success in Japanese language study was as strong as that of teaching methods (90% chose “strong” or “very strong” for “own efforts”, and 82.5% for “teaching methods”). Students in Zagreb appear to put more faith in their own efforts (92% chose “strong” or “very strong” for “own efforts”, and 60% for “teaching methods”). The influence of exposure to Japanese language in the classroom was perceived as “strong” or “very strong” by a larger percentage of students in Pula (80%) than in Zagreb (60%) while the opposite is true for their opinions on the influence of exposure to Japanese language outside of the classroom (47.5% in Pula and 80% in Zagreb). Students of both universities were optimistic about being able to use Japanese in practice after three years of study – 82.5% in Pula and 76% in Zagreb mostly or entirely believed that they would be able to use it.

In the second half of the questionnaire, students were provided with a list of 16 learning methods and/or activities typically used in foreign language study and asked to state how much they enjoyed them and how easily they participated in them, and how useful they feel the activities were for foreign language study (in general, not solely for Japanese). Tables 6 and 7 provide rankings extrapolated from points assigned to the 16 items by students who participated in these activities on a scale from 1 = “not good at all / not useful at all” to 5 = “very good / very useful” (the median being 3 = neither good nor bad / neither useful nor useless).

The column “Anxious participants only” lists the total ranking for the 21 participants who replied with “often” or “always” to the question “Do you or have you ever felt uncomfortable, nervous or worried about studying Japanese?” in the first half of the questionnaire. Table 6 below summarizes answers to the question “How much did you enjoy the following teaching methods and how well were you able to participate in the following activities in foreign language classes (including Japanese)?”.

It may be interesting to note that four of the six lowest ranked activities for both groups of students, i.e. those least enjoyable and least easy to participate in, include preparation in advance followed by presenting prepared materials without much deviation from the script. Several highest ranking ones, on the other hand, such as get-togethers with professors, students and native speakers, pair work, and making up sentences with new grammar and vocabulary, involve unscripted, spontaneous and creative use of language, as well as interaction.

Table 6. Student enjoyment of learning methods and ability to participate in activities in foreign language classes (including Japanese) – Pula and Zagreb 2018

	All participants	Score	Anxious participants only	Score
1	watching films or series and listening to music in the FL	4.65	watching films or series and listening to music in the FL	4.62
2	informal get-togethers of professors and students	4.22	informal get-togethers with professors and students	4.31
3	informal get-togethers with native speakers out of class	4.2	listening to the professor's explanations in class	4.29
4	listening to the professor's explanations in class	4.16	participating in cultural events related to the FL	4.28
5	pair work	4.13	informal get-togethers with native speakers out of class	4.19
6	making up sentences using new grammar or vocabulary	3.99	making up sentences using new grammar or vocabulary	4.15
7	participating in cultural events related to the FL	3.98	pair work	4.09
8	debate or discussion	3.86	group work	3.67
9	group work	3.73	listening to a tape and repeating after it	3.58
10	answering the professor's questions in class	3.7	conversation roleplay	3.57
11	conversation roleplay	3.67	making presentations	3.5
12	listening to a tape and repeating after it	3.59	answering the professor's questions in class	3.48
13	conducting or participating in interviews with other students	3.56	conducting or participating in interviews with other students	3.45
14	making presentations	3.38	debate or discussion	3.15
15	participating in a speech contest	3.37	giving an in-class speech memorized in advance	2.93
16	giving an in-class speech memorized in advance	3.13	participating in a speech contest	2.43

The safest and most enjoyable activity is a passive one (“watching films or TV series and listening to music in the language”), although quite bene-

ficial for increasing language input. It is also one that gives students the freedom to pursue their own interests and preferences when it comes to what they are watching or listening to, another useful hint for class activity design. For example, activity creation could include letting students choose topics on their own, incorporating more video and audio materials, etc.

Only two activities in Table 6 have rankings which differ for anxious participants as opposed to overall ones by more than 0.5 points, both perceived as more difficult by anxious participants: debate or discussion (3.15 vs. 3.86) and participating in a speech contest” (2.43 vs. 3.37).

Table 7 (displayed on the next page) aggregates answers to the question “How useful do you think the following teaching methods and activities are for foreign language learning (including Japanese)?”. These rankings are markedly similar to those in Table 6 with the exception of greater importance given to answering the professor’s questions in class which rose in rank from #10 (#12 for anxious participants) to #6 with an identical score as that of pair work (#7 for anxious participants). It can be concluded that despite finding it difficult and stressful to interact with the professor, especially in front of other students, many participants do consider it useful for the learning process. Structured activities such as presentations, interviews and speeches (which may be easier to conduct and grade than non-structured ones and are therefore preferred by educators) once again occupy the lowest rankings when it comes to student perceptions of their usefulness. No items on the list deviate from the overall score in the case of “anxious participants” by more than 0.37 points (participating in a speech contest).

When presented with an open-ended question as to which speech activities they would like to participate in more within their Japanese studies programs, 35 (53.85%) out of a total of 65 students listed conversation in pairs which appears to be the preferred type of activity. Informal interactions with native speakers and presentations were also frequently mentioned (the latter despite scoring poorly in Table 6 and 7).

Lastly, those students who had participated in extracurricular Japanese speaking activities (informal get-togethers with native speakers organized by the professors in Zagreb and semi-structured interview activities with classmates in Pula) generally found them useful and stimulative. They indicated being aware of the limits of their linguistic ability to participate in the activities, but were mostly satisfied with their performance within those limits.

Table 7. Student perceptions of the usefulness of learning methods and activities in foreign language classes (including Japanese) – Pula and Zagreb 2018

	All participants	Score	Anxious participants only	Score
1	<i>informal get-togethers with native speakers out of class</i>	4.73	<i>informal get-togethers with native speakers out of class</i>	4.84
2	<i>watching films or TV series and listening to music in the FL</i>	4.64	<i>making up sentences using new grammar or vocabulary</i>	4.71
3	<i>making up sentences using new grammar or vocabulary</i>	4.59	<i>listening to the professor's explanations in class</i>	4.62
4	<i>listening to the professor's explanations in class</i>	4.56	<i>watching films or TV series and listening to music in the FL</i>	4.57
5	<i>informal get-togethers with professors and students</i>	4.4	<i>informal get-togethers with professors and students</i>	4.52
6	<i>pair work</i>	4.22	<i>pair work</i>	4.38
7	<i>answering the professor's questions in class</i>	4.22	<i>answering the professor's questions in class</i>	4.33
8	<i>participating in cultural events related to the FL</i>	4.14	<i>participating in cultural events related to the FL</i>	4.33
9	<i>conversation roleplay</i>	4.06	<i>conversation roleplay</i>	4.33
10	<i>debate or discussion</i>	4.02	<i>group work</i>	4.09
11	<i>group work</i>	3.81	<i>debate or discussion</i>	3.78
12	<i>listening to a tape and repeating after it</i>	3.67	<i>making presentations</i>	3.75
13	<i>making presentations</i>	3.57	<i>conducting or participating in interviews with other students</i>	3.7
14	<i>conducting or participating in interviews with other students</i>	3.52	<i>listening to a tape and repeating after it</i>	3.62
15	<i>participating in a speech contest</i>	3.37	<i>participating in a speech contest</i>	3
16	<i>giving an in-class speech memorized in advance</i>	3.02	<i>giving an in-class speech memorized in advance</i>	2.79

The positive aspects of extracurricular informal get-togethers with native speakers organized by the professors, and listed by students in Zagreb, include the chance to use Japanese “in real time”, learning new vocabulary and grammar by observing how they are used by native speakers and more experienced students, anxiety reduction due to seeing the efforts of their studying pay off, increased confidence regarding independent use of Japanese, and the need to quickly improvise even with limited knowledge.

The positive aspects of the interview activities identified by students in Pula included resolving mental block issues that they usually came across during conversations, feeling more free, confident and relaxed, being able to talk about a wide array of topics, increasing their vocabulary, the lack of evaluation criteria and pressure to speak correctly, awareness that other students make mistakes as well, the chance to use simpler vocabulary and grammar in which they had more confidence, and the chance to practice in pairs with classmates they had never interacted with in such a way before.

6. DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted on two sets of participants belonging to somewhat different backgrounds. On average, students of Zagreb University tend to be older than their Pula University counterparts and more accustomed to university study which could decrease language anxiety. First year students in Pula face the added difficulty of having just entered university and having to adjust to new learning methods. Japanese study is the only course of study for 62.5% of Pula students, whereas all of the students in Zagreb have a different major or are already employed, which limits the amount of time they can dedicate to studying or practicing Japanese outside of the classroom, and may contribute to language anxiety. Students in Pula with Japanese as a single major, on the other hand, may feel more anxious about the learning process precisely because it is expected to define the course of their careers once they graduate. Any impediment to their willingness to communicate is especially relevant, as the most immediate demand for Japanese speakers on the Croatian job market lies in tourism where moderately high speaking proficiency is expected (tour guides, hotel staff etc.). Further research into the effects of these variables on the feelings and attitudes towards language learning in the case of both sets of participants is necessary.

Student answers to questionnaire items appear to be in line with the vicious cycle of FLA described in related research. Japanese is a difficult language to learn for native speakers of Slavic languages due to great

differences in both grammar and vocabulary. Anxious students may also feel overwhelmed by its difficulty. Many students perceive their own competence as lower than expected given the duration of previous study. At the same time, they are encouraged to pay attention to linguistic accuracy and are highly reluctant to make mistakes, which may indicate overly rigid perceptions of the language learning curve. They appear unaccustomed to speaking Japanese creatively, but seem very willing to do so when given the chance, despite high anxiety levels.

The students' relatively low speaking proficiency self-assessment scores at both universities point to the need to pay greater attention to this aspect of language learning, regardless of whether these perceptions are a source of language anxiety or not. The likelihood of students finding the chance to communicate with native Japanese speakers more frequently (weekly or even daily) depends on uncontrollable external factors such as the number of Japanese speakers living in their area. It may remain low, but the positive evaluations of interactive activities with classmates indicate that chances to practice Japanese language abound even in places with few Japanese speakers around, and giving more opportunities to speak Japanese with their classmates is well within the power of their departments. The results point to the potential of incorporating a greater amount of free, non-structured conversation activities on a wide array of topics into university curricula. This could provide both high and low anxiety students with ample opportunity to practice and reinforce what they have learned, reduce stress caused by being unaccustomed to speaking the language or constantly required to speak it correctly so as not to learn it incorrectly, and help them prepare for post-graduation situations where they will be expected to make do with limited knowledge if they choose to pursue a career involving the Japanese language.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on two research questions. The first research question was answered positively: learners of Japanese at the universities of Pula and Zagreb do experience a relatively high degree of FLA when it comes to speaking Japanese. This is closely related to the students' fear of making mistakes and their perceived lack of knowledge (particularly grammar and vocabulary). It occurs most frequently in class due to the presence of the teacher and a large number of other students, but appears to be significantly subdued during speaking exercises in pairs. It does not appear to have a detrimental effect on student motivation for speaking Japanese; students appear willing to engage in meaningful interaction in Japanese and are aware of the influence of their own efforts

on language learning success. However, they are also overwhelmed with other important aspects of the learning process and believe that they have not been given sufficient chances to practice speaking in general.

The second research question focused on activity design hints that can be gleaned from the students' evaluations of previously experienced speaking exercises interpreted in the light of their Japanese speaking anxiety ratings. Rankings of their enjoyment and ability to participate in various activities, their perceptions of their usefulness and their answers to the question of which activities they would like to see more of during their studies pointed to the significant potential of non-structured activities for reducing FLA. These include conversations in pairs with emphasis on interaction with classmates or native speakers, without overt error correction or need to speak correctly and with the freedom to choose their own topics and use whichever vocabulary or grammar points they can think of rather than specific ones. It is the author's hope that these kinds of activities will be implemented to a greater extent in the future, with their impact on proficiency and speaking anxiety adequately tested.

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SUMMARY

Foreign Language Anxiety in the Case of Croatian University Learners of Japanese: Implications for Speaking Activity Design

Foreign language anxiety is a phenomenon commonly observed during the process of foreign language learning, which may negatively affect aspects of this process, especially oral production and motivation to continue with one's studies. The aims of this study are (1) to investigate the frequency, sources and characteristics of foreign language anxiety regarding speaking activities in the case of learners of the Japanese language at two Croatian higher education institutions, and (2) to find out which speaking activities anxious learners of Japanese in Croatia would willingly participate in, while remaining sufficiently challenged by the activities to gain new or reinforce previously acquired linguistic knowledge. A questionnaire was distributed in February and March of 2018 to 65 students of the University of Pula's bachelor's program in Japanese language and culture and the University of Zagreb's Japanese studies program. The results point to low self-assessment of Japanese speaking competence and high levels of Japanese speaking anxiety among students, particularly due to fear of making mistakes, the presence of other individuals relevant to the learning process (classmates, teachers, other native speakers of Japanese) and the lack of activities focused on meaningful interaction in Japanese. The participants provided ratings for various activities frequently used in foreign language education according to two factors, (1) the quality of their own experience with the activity and ease of participating in it, and (2) their opinion as to the usefulness of the activity for knowledge acquisition. Non-structured, improvisational conversation exercises, such as pair work, received high ratings, which points to the potential of these activities to help learners overcome debilitating language anxiety.

Keywords: Japanese language learning, Croatian higher education, foreign language anxiety, speaking activities, interaction, fear of making mistakes, focus on meaning, activity design

SAŽETAK

Strah od stranoga jezika u slučaju studenata japanskoga jezika na hrvatskim sveučilištima: Sugestije za osmišljavanje govornih aktivnosti

Strah od jezika pojava je karakteristična za proces učenja stranoga jezika te može negativno utjecati na njega, pogotovo na govornu produkciju i motivaciju za nastavak učenja. Ciljevi ovoga istraživanja su (1) ispitati učestalost, izvore i obilježja straha od jezika u vezi s govornim aktivnostima u slučaju studenata japanskoga jezika na dvije hrvatske visokoškolske institucije i (2) ispitati u kojim bi govornim aktivnostima studenti japanskoga jezika u Hrvatskoj svojevolumeno i rado sudjelovali, a koje su dostatno izazovne kako bi kroz njih stekli novo jezično znanje ili utvrdili postojeće. U veljači i ožujku 2018. godine 65 studenata preddiplomskoga studija Japanski jezik i kultura Sveučilišta Jurja Dobrile u Puli i slobodnoga studija japanologije Sveučilišta u Zagrebu sudjelovalo je u anketi. Njezini rezultati ukazuju na nisku samoprocjenu vlastite sposobnosti za razgovor na japanskome jeziku i visoku razinu straha od jezika vezanoga uz razgovor, pogotovo zbog straha od pogrešaka, prisustva drugih pojedinaца povezanih s procesom učenja jezika (kolege, profesori, drugi izvorni govornici japanskoga jezika) i maloga broja interaktivnih aktivnosti s naglaskom na prijenos značenja. Sudionici su ocijenili razne aktivnosti često korištene prilikom učenja stranih jezika prema dvama faktorima: (1) kvaliteta vlastitoga iskustva i lakoća sudjelovanja u određenoj aktivnosti te (2) mišljenje sudionika o korisnosti metode za usvajanje znanja. U odgovorima su visoko ocijenili nestrukturirane, improvizacijske vježbe razgovora poput onih u paru, što ukazuje na potencijal takvih aktivnosti da pomognu studentima nadvladati negativnu jezičnu anksioznost.

Ključne riječi: učenje japanskoga jezika, hrvatsko visokoškolsko obrazovanje, strah od jezika, govorne aktivnosti, interakcija, strah od pogrešaka, usredotočenost na značenje, dizajn vježbi

