Using cognitive behaviour therapy-based techniques for decreasing foreign language speaking anxiety and increasing confidence among EFL students: An intervention study

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Abstract

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is a common and proven way to treat anxiety. In language learning settings, CBT has been shown to remedy students' anxiety and help them actively engage with a new language. However, research is inconclusive on how to best approach CBT-based interventions for language learning, and how to cater to students' specific needs. To determine how to best develop CBT-based activities for the foreign language classroom, this study adapted a number of validated tools and activities to a Japanese university context to determine how students experience foreign language anxiety (FLA), and how a CBT-based intervention can remedy it. This qualitative intervention study describes the use of a questionnaire which includes scenarios that gauge how students experience FLA, and how they describe and manage their emotions. CBT-inspired activities were then implemented as an intervention with 87 students in 4 classes to help them reduce FLA, feel more positive about their skills, and become more confident about speaking English in class. At the beginning of the courses, a majority of respondents (*N*=69) reported having negative emotions regarding the questionnaire scenarios. After the CBT-based intervention, reflection journal questions and a final questionnaire showed that the intervention helped students develop a more positive view of their speaking abilities, especially with regard to making mistakes. This study shows how CBT activities can be developed and adapted to specific language learning contexts and provides recommendations for future practice.

Keywords: *Cognitive behaviour therapy; foreign language anxiety; intervention study; Japanese EFL classroom; speaking-related anxiety*.

Introduction

The exploration of foreign language anxiety (FLA) continues to be an important area of study in language acquisition research as it informs classroom practice, curriculum design and the support mechanisms that can be put in place for foreign language learners (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). FLA is a barrier to language learners fulfilling their full potential as effective speakers; it "can become a distraction that prevents them from enjoying speaking and interferes with their attention" (Maher & King, 2022a, p. 138). Addressing it directly enables students to gain confidence and motivation while learning to reflect and think critically about their own language skills and learning processes. FLA has been extensively investigated and has been found to be a frequent occurrence in the language classroom (Fattahi & Cuocci, 2022). It is recommended that teachers address it as a matter of routine at an early stage of a student's learning trajectory. Being a successful language learner entails mastery of not only linguistic skills but also other factors, including self-directed learning skills such as goal setting, study planning, and time management (Peeters & Mynard, 2023). Learning how to manage confidence and FLA is another such skill. Therefore, if learners are shy or anxious to speak, it is important to understand the reasons and identify potential solutions. Tailored activities can positively impact many students' learning experiences while informing learning design and curriculum development and introducing clear reflection and FLA activities into the language learning curriculum.

This study is a continuation of the research initiated by the authors in 2018. A data-collection tool was developed for discovering what emotions students described in situations where FLA was expected to be prevalent. Based on Gkonou and Oxford's (2016) 'Managing Your Emotions' (MYE) for language learning, the tool, a scenario-based questionnaire, was used to confirm (a) which communicative situations cause high FLA, (b) what emotions and thoughts students described in these situations and the reasons for feeling them, (c) what situational factors might be involved, and (d) whether the students utilised any coping strategies. It was found that students attributed the highest number of negative emotions to situations where they wanted to speak, but felt they could not, such as during a class discussion. This was often due to the worry of making mistakes or being misunderstood. They subsequently described emotions of frustration, shame, and insecurity. The most influential situational factor was found to be 'frequency' (how often anxiety was felt in that situation), with students rating the situation as increasingly negative the more it occurred.

These findings were used to develop practical activities drawn from cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), using its principles as a framework to improve teaching and learning. The current paper describes the application of the newly developed activities and presents an 'intervention study' (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021), using the MYE tool and CBT-based activities to help students reduce FLA and become more confident about speaking in their foreign language (FL – in this case it refers to English). Previously, it was shown that particular scenarios caused FLA, and that students used a range of coping strategies to cope with this anxiety (Curry et al., 2020). In the current study, interventions were designed based on these

findings. To track possible effects of these interventions, students' FLA experiences were measured and compared.

The aim of the research was to implement CBT-based activities to increase students' speaking confidence and develop more positive thoughts about their speaking abilities. Through the analysis of journal reflections and a final questionnaire, it could be determined whether less FLA was reported than that was at the beginning of the course. The research questions for this study are:

RQ1: How do feelings of anxiety and confidence change through in-class confidence interventions based on cognitive behaviour therapy techniques?

RQ2: Which factors related to the intervention do students identify when they report on confidence changes?

Literature review

The complex nature of FLA

Understanding how and why FLA occurs in the classroom is necessary to justify why it should be dealt with directly by educators. Horwitz et al (1986) define FLA as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). This definition emphasises the complexity of the condition; students can have a variety of emotions generated by diverse beliefs and experiences, but many of these emotions constrain them from expressing themselves in their FL. Curry et al. (2020) found that students experience FLA as (a) lacking the linguistic skills to effectively communicate their thoughts, (b) lacking confidence to speak, (c) fearing being negatively evaluated if they made mistakes, (d) lacking ability to study, and (e) generally feeling that they are not able to communicate. Mora et al. (2024) have found that task complexity can heighten speaking anxiety in L2 learners too, and that it can impair the quality of students' speech performance, particularly fluency, pronunciation accuracy, and perceived accentedness. Designing appropriate tasks is therefore a critical need to address anxiety in pedagogical approaches to oral language development.

It is important to note that FLA should not be viewed as simply an individual problem. To address it, we must consider the social context in which it occurs, which justifies both an individual and group approach to its alleviation. MacIntyre (2017) states that FLA "has both internal and social dimensions" (p. 28); it "is influenced by internal physiological processes, cognition, and emotional states along with the demands of the situation and the presence of other people, among other things, considered over multiple timescales" (pp. 27-28). The importance of the social dimension is raised by Kitano (2001), King (2014), and King and Smith (2017), who discuss the role of social anxiety in FLA, emphasising concerns that students feel they are constantly being evaluated by others. Sufferers of social anxiety

"typically hold false assumptions about their perceived inability to behave in an appropriate manner in front of others and tend to be highly critical of their social performance" (King, 2014, p. 233). The classroom as a social context plays a major role in the development of our students' personalities, and so they are highly conscious of their peers and the need to be accepted by them. Therefore, "anxious learners can develop an acute awareness of interpersonal dynamics between themselves and their peers, causing them to moderate their behaviour" (Maher & King, 2023, p. 106) and generally take a more passive role in class, not actively trying to improve their skills (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

Understanding anxious learners

To demonstrate why a CBT-based approach for alleviating FLA can be effective, it is helpful to refer to Aveni's (2005) study on how individuals construct their self-image as speakers of FLs when studying abroad. Language forms part of our identity; how we use it tells the world something about who we are, and so it contributes to how we are perceived and understood by others. This self-image is continuously undergoing "definition and reinterpretation by the audience to whom the individual plays" (Aveni, 2005, p. 12). It is articulated both through spoken language and through non-verbal communication, and responses contribute to the further formation of the self-image. Cultural influences also shape the self and how the individual perceives the world, all parts of a dialectic process in which language plays a pivotal constructive role (Peeters, 2020). For a student learning a new language in a different country, where norms may differ, additional challenges might occur. Unfamiliarity with norms and language can lead to a communication barrier, "and only an altered picture of the self, one filtered through this new, incomplete language, is projected by the learner" (Aveni, 2005, p. 14).

Though Aveni (2005) is discussing students on a study abroad experience, and most of the students in this study are not in a foreign country; they are still in an environment where the foreign language is expected to be used, and the student is expected to have some level of proficiency. Lacking that proficiency, or more crucially *believing* that they lack it, leaves students unable to express their true selves. They are not truly in 'their' culture, especially when initially they are in a class consisting mostly of strangers. Maintaining self-image becomes problematic when one cannot express what one truly wants to communicate. Therefore, as using an FL is a risk, avoiding it becomes a safety strategy, which Aveni noted was occurring among her subjects. To use an FL successfully, learners need to "remain secure in the social hierarchy by maintaining an appropriate *status* among the interaction participants, as well as a feeling of *control* over the interaction and their own destiny" (Aveni, 2005, p. 19).

Activities which challenge the beliefs, assumptions, and behaviours of anxious learners, as noted by King (2014), can help them negate the risk to the self (Aveni, 2005), and help learners to objectively evaluate linguistic performance. This is especially relevant with learners of a cultural background in which "socially reticent, reserved behaviour is culturally acceptable" (King, 2014, p. 234) as it is in Japan. Silence is often used as an avoidance strategy to avoid

potential error and subsequent embarrassment (King & Smith, 2017), leading students to 'withdraw' from the class (Maher & King, 2022b). In turn, student silence can inhibit peers; "if their classmates do not speak, they may feel expected to remain silent too or feel reluctant to act differently" (Maher & King, p. 217), thus increasing FLA amongst others.

King and Smith (2017) note the prevalence of the fear of negative evaluation in the Japanese university FL classroom; "participants spoke about always feeling scrutinised and judged by peers while lessons were in progress, and a number of learners made references to the 'eyes' they felt were always around them" (p. 100), which can lead some learners to care more about peer evaluations than the official evaluations (Maher & King, 2022a). Yoneyama (2007), in her discussion of silent behaviour in high school classes, notes that students feel obliged not to draw attention to themselves, and teachers also expect students to be silent (Maher, 2020). Such experiences must therefore play a role in how students are socialised to behave in a learning environment. Another factor affecting FLA in Japan can be the transition to a communicative language teaching style where students are expected to be full contributors, from a school environment where spoken English may not have been used throughout (Shachter, 2018). Students may use their first language accordingly. Maher and King (2022) suggest that this is also a form of 'silence' as it avoids the target language.

Lastly, there is the influence of perfectionist thinking and the fear of being negatively evaluated. Students can hold the belief that an utterance must be perfect in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. The link between FLA and perfectionism has been confirmed by Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) and Dewaele (2017). According to Gregersen and Horwitz (2002), "rather than demonstrating less-than perfect language skills and exposing themselves to the possible negative reactions of others, perfectionist language learners would likely prefer to remain silent, waiting until they were certain of how to express their thoughts" (p. 563). In this and previous studies (Curry et al., 2020), there are numerous examples of students who avoided speaking because of a perceived lack of language skills. Another similar and oft-expressed belief was a lack of ability to study, meaning that even when the student studied and prepared, they still did not feel their skills were good enough. The result is that "learners who hold negative attitudes toward their own L2 skills or who are unable to predict a positive outcome of their anticipated L2 use are more likely to feel socially anxious" (Aveni, 2005, p. 69). Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) found that anxious and non-anxious students both seem to recognise when their performance is flawed but vary in how they respond to mistakes. They also observed that anxious students frequently linked mistakes to their anxiety. Thus, anxious students are aware that their anxiety impedes their learning. What may help them is learning how to react to errors in a more emotionally healthy and objective way, which is what CBT-derived activities attempt to do.

CBT and FLA reduction activities

CBT's core principle is that a person's emotions and the behaviour that results are influenced by their thoughts and beliefs (Westbrook et al., 2011). Simply stated, beliefs affect feelings and

subsequently the course of action taken. This is referred to as the cognitive cycle. Cognitive cycles can be both positive and negative, depending on the nature of the cognition. If a belief is dysfunctional, the emotions which result will probably result in a detrimental action, as exemplified in Figure 1.
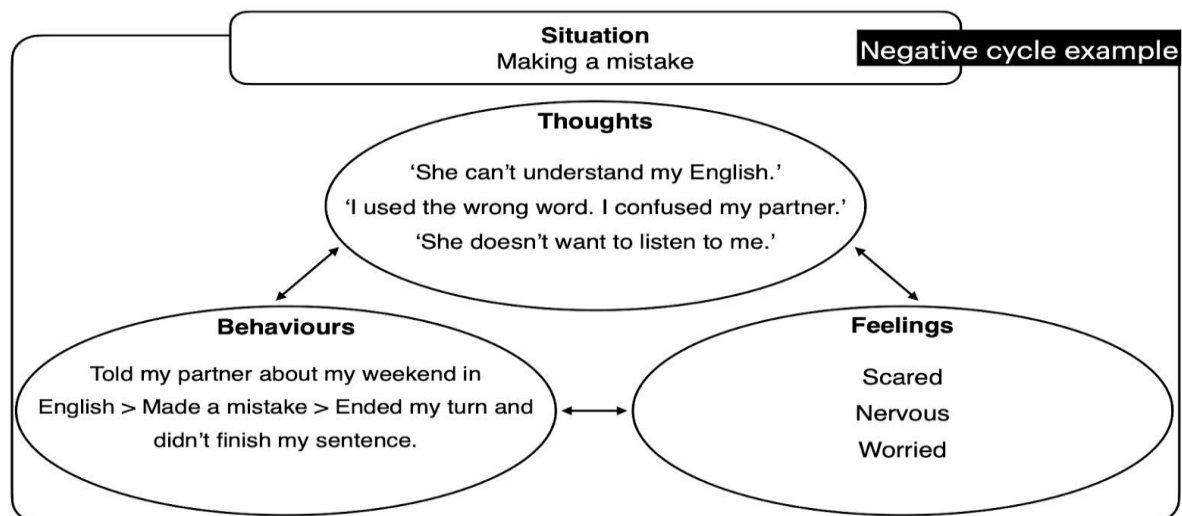

Figure 1. *Example of negative cognitive cycle (Maher, 2024, p. 135).*

Beliefs may result from direct experience, but they may also be based on assumptions, what Maher and King (2022a) refer to as 'feared predictions' which can cause negative actions such as silent behaviour. Through CBT interventions, a client learns how to identify anxiety-causing cognitions and replace them with more objective and functional thoughts (Stallard, 2019).

There are three kinds of cognition, which we hope the present intervention activity can account for. They occur at different levels, roughly analogous to levels of depth as demonstrated in Figure 2 below.
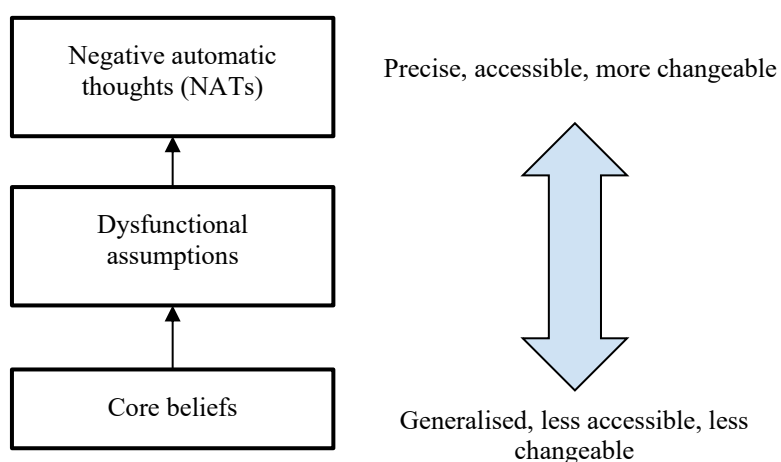

Figure 2. *Levels of cognition (adapted from Westbrook et al., 2011, p.11).*

Negative automatic thoughts, as the term implies, arise without conscious effort, and are often taken as a direct representation of reality, when in fact they are often just assumptions or opinions with no basis in rational fact (Westbrook et al., 2011). CBT training involves becoming conscious of these thoughts occurring, and learning how to objectively challenge them, as they can be considered as existing at the 'surface' level. Dysfunctional assumptions occur at the 'mid-level', linking the other two cognitions. They tend to take the form of over-generalised conditional statements to rationalise core beliefs. They are problematic in that they are overly rigid, making dealing with difficulties more complicated. Lastly, core beliefs are central to an individual's worldview, and "manifest as general and absolute statements" (Westbrook et al, 2011, p. 10). Because of this, they are harder to change in the short term. An aim of the current intervention activities was to help students address FLA at these three cognitive levels, through helping them in the first stage to recognise that their current thinking about their lack of confidence might be misplaced, to a longer-term process of examining their core beliefs through reflecting on their learning.

Although Curry (2014) and Maher (2020) describe using CBT-derived activities with learners on an individual basis in a self-access setting, this may not be possible for many educators, and it is advantageous for both teachers and students to deal with the issue by bringing the intervention to them. However, there are also other reasons why a group-based approach is effective in addressing FLA. Allowing students to share their thoughts and feelings regarding FLA can help them create empathy and positive emotions regarding themselves and each other (Mercer, 2016). Creating positive relationships by removing FLA and concern about the possible negative perceptions of peers is necessary to succeed in learning; "ultimately, communication is about understanding how another person might interpret or misinterpret an act of communication and requires you to put yourself into the mind of the other to some degree" (Mercer, 2016, p. 100). Discovering that classmates often share the same worries can help learners realise that they have much in common with each other and possibly lead to less negative comparisons being made. A positive class atmosphere can lead to more enjoyment of learning, increased self-confidence and less anxiety about speaking (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016). Integrating tailored incentives, activities, and prompts for learners has been found to facilitate this positive atmosphere, while also enabling them to develop affective and emotive learning skills (Viberg et al, 2023). The students in Dewaele and MacIntyre's study (2016) describe being part of a familiar and comfortable group in which they can relax. So, an FLA intervention activity is a means of making such a group as it breaks down barriers between students, making them confront their assumptions about each other's thinking, and helping to remove the barriers which prevent enjoyment of the class. It creates a sense of 'commonality' or a shared feeling or experience, the benefit being that "learners often feel better understood and appreciated by interlocutors who have experiences and attitudes in common with them" (Aveni, 2005, p. 103).

Group-based CBT and similar rational-emotive therapy-based techniques have already been demonstrated to be effective in alleviating FLA. The activities in this paper are influenced by Foss and Reitzel (1988) who take a rational emotive approach, concentrating on having students confront their fears about speaking their FL to show that they are "grounded in

irrational and unproductive assumptions" (Foss & Reitzel, 1988, p. 446). Students use a set of questions which ask for evidence to justify beliefs. Toyama and Yamazaki (2021) also base their study on a rational-emotive approach using three elements; (a) cognitive-affective talk, whereby students share their FLA with each other in their L1 and gain advice from peers and the teacher, (b) reflective self-talk, involving translation of the written expression of their FLA into their L2, and (c) positive self-talk, re-writing FLA statements to make them positive. All these activities oblige students to think more rationally about their FLA and were beneficial in helping to alleviate it. Maher (2024) describes a CBT-based activity that can be used for individuals and classes which helps students to recognise what triggers their FLA and subsequently make appropriate coping strategies for it.

The study

Context and participants

The study took place at a mid-sized private university in Chiba, Japan, which specialises in second language learning. The intervention activity formed part of the regular course activities, and so was integrated into the curriculum. The course itself was named 'Peer-supported self-directed learning' and was co-taught by the first author and a colleague. Its goal was to introduce self-directed learning skills and increase students' ability to learn autonomously. To that purpose, the curriculum covered activities that involved goal-setting, planning, and choosing learning resources and strategies, but also affective skills such as managing motivation and confidence. Students would choose their own learning goal for the semester and make and share a plan with the teachers for their individual study. Subsequently, students with similar goals were grouped together. This approach worked well for autonomous learning as students often reported on how much it motivated them, and how they could learn about new strategies and resources from their peers. After making study plans, the students carried them out for the rest of the semester, adjusting them as necessary. Throughout this stage, they used learning journals to record their activities and reflect on progress and matters related to learning, with question prompts. Our intention was to create a 'reflective dialogue' (Kato & Mynard, 2016), leading to an exchange in which the student can be guided to think more deeply and critically about how they are learning. It was in these journals that the students answered the questions for this study, pertaining to their confidence in speaking.

A total of four different classes took part in the study, one per 15-week academic semester. The classes met bi-weekly for 90 minutes. Each class consisted of approximately 20-23 students, mostly from the 3rd and 4th grades (*N*=87). The age range was 20-22, and the majority (approximately 85%) of the students were female. Almost all the students were Japanese nationals with that language as their L1; a handful (6) were Chinese citizens residing in Japan. Although the CBT-based activities were completed by all students as part of class content, they were given the option of consenting to not allowing their data to be collected. Names have been removed and replaced by codes. Everyone was assigned a letter, with a number corresponding

to one of the four classes: for example, Student 2L is from Class 2 (Fall 2021 class), and Student 3N is from Class 3 (Spring 2022 class). The number of respondents for each stage varies due to absences and students not completing tasks.

CBT confidence-building activities

This section describes the content, sequence, and structure of the intervention activities (Table 1). Student data was gathered at each stage apart from the actual class activity (Stage 2).

Table 1. *Intervention activity sequence*

Stage	Week	Description
1. MYE-based scenario questionnaire (see Appendix A)	1 / 2	Initial data gathering, students were asked about their feelings in communicative situations
2. Class CBT-based activity	5 / 6	Lecture and activity on gaining speaking confidence
3. Reflection question 1	5 / 6	Asking students how confident they feel speaking
4. Reflection question 2	13	Asking students if feelings have changed since initial questionnaire
5. Final questionnaire & reflections (see Appendix B)	15	Summary of students' feelings at end of course

MYE-based questionnaire.

Curry et al. (2020) describes the MYE-based questionnaire in detail. As stated above, its primary purpose here was to establish how students felt in specific communicative situations and serve as a basis by which they would be able to compare their feelings at a later point. It establishes awareness of how they feel and acts as a 'starting point'. The communicative situations students reflected on include:

Scenario 1: *You want to say something in your foreign language in class, but you don't.*

Scenario 2: *There is another student in your class who you think is a better speaker than you. You have to do a speaking activity together.*

Scenario 3: *You make a mistake during a classroom speaking activity, and you receive, or perceive, criticism from another student.*

Scenario 4: *You make a mistake during a classroom speaking activity, and you receive, or perceive, criticism from the teacher.*

Class CBT-derived activity.

a) Students discuss why it is important to consider emotions in language learning. When calling for their thoughts, the teacher is often met with silence for the reasons described above. The purpose of the class is explained - their thoughts and feelings about speaking can be managed, and they can actively develop positive thoughts.

b) A scenario is introduced to work on in small groups: *Shigeru has an opportunity to speak English in class, but he feels he can't.*

    The students answer the following questions:
    – Why might he feel this way?
    – What problems could be caused by his feelings?
    – What could he do to overcome his situation and feel better? Can you make any suggestions?

    The purpose here is for students to identify sources of anxiety and link them to dysfunctional assumptions and behaviours. The idea is that students start identifying the problem: *Shigeru will likely not talk and therefore not improve his skills*. They are prompted to make the connection between thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Typically though, students are often not able to provide advice with much clarity; for example, statements such as "he should talk more" or "he should be more confident" have been encountered. As Curry et al. (2020) showed, the majority of students surveyed did not have sufficient coping strategies for FLA, which is why training is necessary.

c) Students now discuss "Is there anything that you're worried about when speaking in class, or using your foreign language?" This allows them to share their thoughts, and to see that many others feel a similar way. More confident students can also have an opportunity to express why they do not feel any FLA or share any coping strategies. As an example, some of the worries shared by the Fall 2022 class include grammar or vocabulary mistakes, not knowing if a response to the other person is correct, and feeling nervous, embarrassed, or anxious.

d) The next part consists of what Stallard (2019) refers to as 'psychoeducation'; the class is introduced to the cognitive cycle and the connection that exists between their cognitions, emotions and actions. They consider the difference between 'facts' and 'beliefs', namely that the former relies on evidence, whereas the latter is subjective and may or may not be true. The classes discuss statements such as 'Japan is an island country' and 'Japan is a small country' and decide whether they are beliefs or facts, and how we determine so. For the latter statement, the inclusion of the qualifier 'small' means that we have to define what we mean by the term; what criteria do we use to measure 'small' in this case? This concept is to make students think more deeply about the validity of 'all or nothing' thinking for their own abilities; for example, regarding statements such as 'I can't speak English', how do they measure their own skills? What criteria do they use?

This idea is given context with the next statements:
- I'm bad at speaking English.
- People will think badly of me if I make mistakes.
- I need to speak English perfectly when I talk.

The students are asked whether any of these statements are facts or beliefs in their cases, and how they would measure them, and what criteria they would use. Additionally, they must consider whether, if they are in fact beliefs, how useful or helpful is it for their progress to have them? They can change their beliefs, so perhaps they could make new, more positive ones that more accurately reflect their objective reality. Here, it is hoped that they will begin to critically examine any core beliefs they have about their skills.

e) In pairs, students take turns asking and answering conversational questions on topics such as travel (e.g. '*Which country do you most want to visit?*'). Afterwards, they analyse the conversation with questions designed to make them reflect on their performance in a positive and objective way, looking for evidence that the conversation was both enjoyable and mutually understandable (see Appendix B).

Responses invariably demonstrate that although mistakes were made, the conversations were still mutually intelligible and fun, and that errors do not in fact lead to embarrassment and a breakdown in conversation, the realisation of which can help them to challenge their dysfunctional assumptions about speaking. Students are encouraged to always make this kind of reflective analysis after every speaking opportunity, in order to build a realistic and positive appreciation of their skills. It also demonstrates to those with perfectionist traits that they can be successful communicators even if their grammar or vocabulary is less than flawless.

Journal reflection question 1.

The question is '*How confident do you feel about speaking in English? Why?'*. This is used to see what proportion of students are still suffering FLA at this stage, and to determine whether there is evidence that the CBT-inspired activity may have influenced their thinking and helped them to reassess any negative core beliefs.

Journal reflection question 2.

The question is '*Please look back at the 外国語を話す時に感じる感情についてのアンケート* (questionnaire) *you completed at the start of the course. Look at the scenario which made you feel the least confident and what your feelings were. Have you changed your feelings since you completed the questionnaire? Why?'*. This is used to see the extent to which feelings,

negative thoughts and core beliefs may have changed, and whether there is any more evidence that the CBT-based activity had any effect.

Final questionnaire.

This is used to discover how much (if anything) the students remembered of the activity, and what effect it had on their FLA and negative core beliefs; also, to find out if they were using any strategies, if they were still worried, and whether their thinking about making mistakes had changed.

Results

Initial questionnaire

The MYE questionnaire (described in the above section) was written in Japanese, with the students given the option of completing it in that language or in English. For the 2021 classes it was done on paper, then switched to Google Forms in 2022. Translations were provided by administrative colleagues and a student research assistant with a high level of English.

Table 2 below shows which scenarios were rated as the most anxiety-inducing. Scenario 1 was rated the highest for Classes 1-3, while Scenario 3 was rated highest for Class 4, with Scenario 1 being a close second.

Table 2. *Student ratings on the different scenarios presented across four classes on a 10-point scale.*

	Scenario	Average	Std. Dev.	Respondents
Class 1 (Spring 2021) 22 participants	1	7.45	2.31	20
	2	4.58	2.89	19
	3	4.06	3.08	18
	4	3.06	2.94	18
	Scenario	Average	Std. Dev.	Respondents
Class 2 (Fall 2021) 19 participants	1	6.69	2.21	16
	2	6.31	2.63	16
	3	5.00	2.73	15
	4	3.23	2.55	13
	Scenario	Average	Std. Dev.	Respondents
Class 3 (Spring 2022) 18 participants	1	6.83	1.98	15
	2	4.44	3.61	16
	3	5.24	2.33	17
	4	3.47	2.35	17

	Scenario	Average	Std. Dev.	Respondents
Class 4 (Fall 2022) 20 participants	1	6.65	2.28	20
	2	4.30	3.05	20
	3	6.70	2.87	20
	4	4.70	2.49	20

Note: The scenarios that were rated the most difficult are marked in red.

Table 3 demonstrates the most common feelings expressed in the scenarios (responses to Questions 2, 9, 16, 24; '*Describe one or more of the emotions you feel when you do this*'). A wide range of emotions was recorded as students often described more than one. Rather than display the total range of feelings, those most frequently seen have been selected. It is clear that negative feelings predominate in the top-rated scenarios.

Table 3. *Most common positive and negative feelings recorded for each scenario across four classes (frequency of mentions in brackets).*

	Scenario	Most common positive feelings (number of mentions)	Most common negative feelings (number of mentions)
Class 1 (Spring 2021) 22 participants	1 (Q2)	I want to talk more (1) Calm (1)	Frustrated (6) No confidence (6) Pitiful (4)
	2 (Q9)	Happy (5) Fun (4) Motivated (2)	No confidence (6) Anxious / Anxiety (5) Nervous (3)
	3 (Q16)	Grateful (6) Happy (5) Opportunity for mistakes to be pointed out (2)	Embarrassed (6) Frustrated (2) Disappointed (2) Distressed (2)
	4 (Q24)	Happy (4) Grateful (4) Motivated (4)	Embarrassed (5) Nervous (2)
Class 2 (Fall 2021) 19 participants	1 (Q2)	Happy (1) Whatever (1)	Frustrated (6) Nervous (6) No confidence (6)
	2 (Q9)	Happy (3)	Nervous (7) Embarrassed (5) No confidence / Lose confidence (4)
	3 (Q16)	Grateful (7)	Embarrassed / Shamed (7)
	4 (Q24)	Grateful (6)	Embarrassed (3)
Class 3 (Spring 2022) 18 participants	1 (Q2)	Feel nothing particularly (1)	Nervous / scared (6) Frustrating (5) Anxious (5)
	2 (Q9)	Respect (2) Opportunity (2)	Nervous (3)
	3 (Q16)	Glad (3) Grateful (3)	Ashamed (7)

	4 (Q24)	Appreciative / Gratitude (6)	Ashamed (3)
Class 4 (Fall 2022) 20 participants	1 (Q2)	Wanting to do my best (1)	Frustrated (6) Anxiety (4)
	2 (Q9)	Happy (3)	Anxious (1) What if I drag them down? (1) Shy (1) Low spirits (1) Tough (1) Sense of inferiority (1)
	3 (Q16)	Grateful (3)	Embarrassment (4) Frustrating (3)
	4 (Q24)	Good / Positive (2)	Shame / Embarrassment (5)

Table 4 summarises the reasons for the feelings individual students expressed in the scenario questionnaire (Questions 3, 10, 17, 24) in which they gave their highest score from 0 (positive) to 10 (negative) (Questions 1, 8, 15, 22). Some students gave equal scores for more than one scenario, so both have been included. Sentiment analysis included categorising positive and negative expressions for every relevant statement students made in their reflections. The most common belief at this point is that students lack the linguistic skills to make themselves properly understood (29 students), which supports the points made by Aveni (2005) and Gregersen and Horwitz (2002). Student 1F provides a good example of this thinking with their reason; *"I came to uni to study English, but I can't speak"*, which was of course not true. We can also see that mistakes are a large source of concern. The next largest category is fear of making mistakes and being embarrassed (18); *"It's because I lose my confidence in my English skills by thinking that I would be laughed at by classmates if I make mistakes, and they would talk behind my back"* (Student 3H), with a further 8 students specifically concerned about having their mistakes pointed out (8).

Table 4. *Codes on feelings reported on by participants during the scenario questionnaire (Week 1 / 2), the first reflection (Week 5 / 6) and the second reflection (Week 13).*

Code	Scenario questionnaire (75 participants)	First reflection (73 participants)	Second reflection (65 participants)
Lacking confidence	11	3	0
Existing confidence	0	1	0
Okay to make mistakes	2	6	19
Lack ability	29	19	4
Mistakes pointed out by others	7	0	0
Fear of mistakes / embarrassment	18	6	3

Concerned about others' perceptions / thoughts, conscious of others	4	3	2
Negative comparison	9	2	6
Looking to improve	1	4	0
Learning opportunity	3	0	4
Missed opportunity	1	0	0
Doesn't happen much	1	0	0
Becoming more positive / confident	0	4	10
Positive / confident	0	14	6
Not positive / not confident	0	2	0
Active participation / strategy use	0	20	10
Referring to confidence class	0	9	22
Positive influence of others	0	6	6
Future-focused	0	9	6

First reflection question

'How confident do you feel about speaking in English? Why?'

When analysing the student responses, there has been a great increase in positive beliefs, and new codes were introduced to reflect this, as shown in Table 4. The largest category is Active participation / Strategy use (20), where students are describing how they changed their perceptions through active participation in conversations, and the use of strategies for getting confidence and speaking and studying more effectively; for example *"I sometimes was passive when I talked in English but I am trying to ask questions to carry on a conversation through this activity, so I think I can be more active"* (Student 2E). The impression here is of people who feel more in control in communicative situations and have gained personal agency. Additionally, the codes 'Future-focussed' and 'Looking to improve' are evidence of students adopting a more goal-oriented mindset; *"Sometimes words and phrases don't come out right away, and sometimes I can't tell what I want to say at once. If I can overcome it, I think I will gradually gain confidence"* (Student 2O). The emergence of these strands of thinking may be because of the class content focussing on self-directed learning and autonomy. Additionally, some students refer to the confidence class in helping them gain a more positive perspective.

> *"Last Friday, we learned about confidence on class. Thanks to it, I could change my mind. When I made mistakes, no one laugh at me. Mistakes are natural. I*

> *can't tell anything and improve skills without good and bad experiences. I remembered that it is the most important to move before thinking. I don't want to forget it anymore".* (Student 1P)

Second reflection question

'Please look back at the 外国語を話す時に感じる感情についてのアンケート (MYE-based questionnaire) you completed at the start of the course. Look at the scenario which made you feel the least confident and what your feelings were. Have you changed your feelings since you completed the questionnaire? Why?'

At this point the majority of students are demonstrating more positive feelings regarding the FLA scenario they chose at the beginning of the course, although there are still many who continue to exhibit anxiety, as shown in Table 4. Points to note include the largest code category of referring to the confidence class, showing that it had directly contributed to a reduction of FLA:

> *"Before taking this class. I didn't speak up my idea in class. However, in this class, we thought why we can't say our opinion and the most answers are afraid of mistake. I changed my mind. The mistakes are not ashamed so I could speak up my idea sometimes. I think I have changed my feeling".* (Student 1J)

Another code category that is likely in reference to the FLA reduction activities are the students who make reference to negative comparisons, but who now state that they no longer do this.

> *"I was not confident when others around me spoke English very fluently. However, through this class, I have come to realize that I need to face myself, not compare with others".* (Student 4C)

However, the number of students who are still afraid of mistakes / embarrassment is still relatively high.

To visualise the changes in beliefs described by the participants, we selected the most frequent codes and looked at their progress, as shown in Figure 3. Intervals represent the MYE-based scenario questionnaire (1), and both reflection questions (2-3). Having a more positive outlook on making mistakes, becoming more positive / confident and acknowledging the positive influence of others were the feelings that steadily increased over the weeks. Other feelings like engaging in active participation / strategy use, feeling positive / confident in general and focussing on the future were fluctuating, but overall improved compared to the first-time participants reported on them.
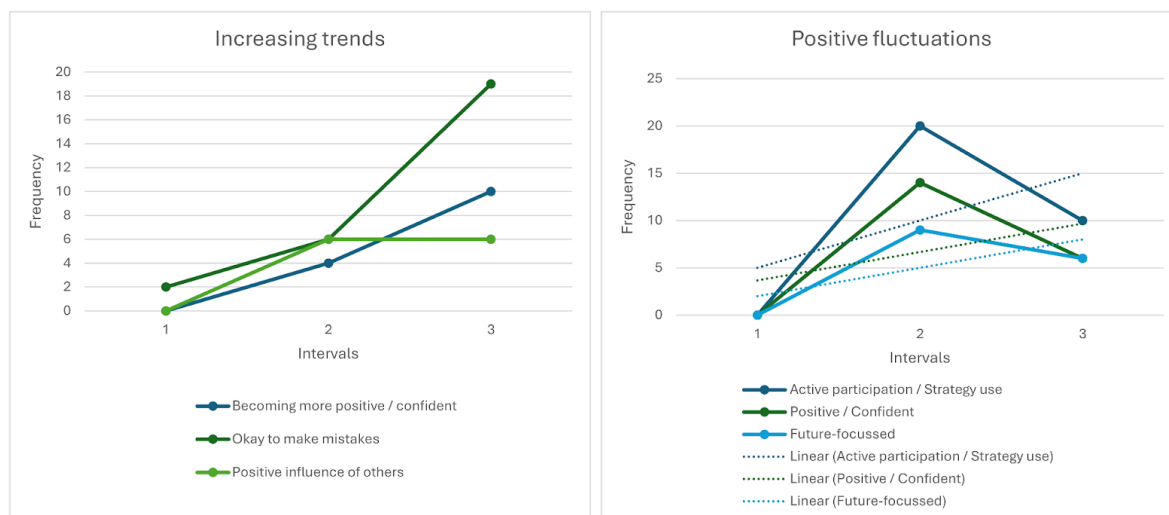
Figure 3. *Positive trends and fluctuations of participants' feelings in the language classroom, based on the number of mentions in students' responses (frequency).*

The positive trends mainly revolve around positive feelings and emotions. On the other hand, negative feelings and emotions were also reported, but saw a consistent decrease in numbers, as shown in Figure 4. Here, it can be observed how feelings of incompetence or fear of the perceptions of others steadily decline.
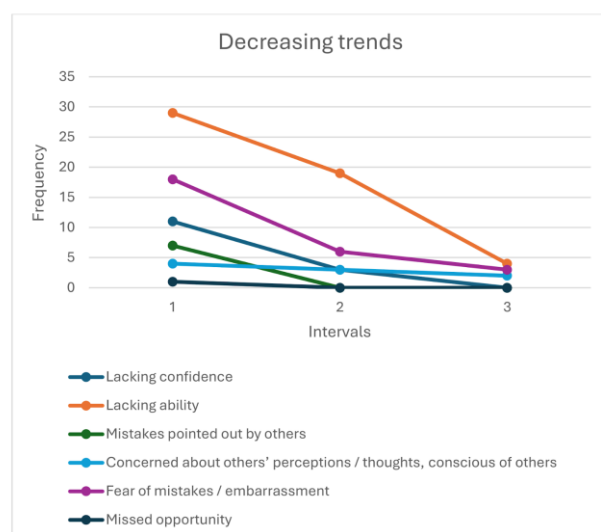

Figure 4. *Negative trends of participants' feelings in the language classroom, based on the number of mentions in students' responses (frequency).*

Final questionnaire

82 responses – the last data collection activity was a feedback questionnaire consisting of initially five questions to determine the following:

- Whether the students remembered the confidence activity, and if so, what ideas it had given them (*Question 1. Do you remember about the class we had about confidence and negative emotions? Write whatever you remember*).

- If the activity had helped them feel more confident about speaking in and outside of class (*Question 2. How are you feeling about speaking English in class since we talked about confidence? Question 3. How about speaking English outside of class?*).

- What kind of worries might still be present, and how they approached challenges to their speaking confidence (*Question 4. Are there any worries or negative thoughts about speaking in English that you have learnt to manage? If so, how?*).

- What strategies they use for managing FLA (*Question 5. If you feel nervous about speaking English in class now, what do you do?*).

- The last question was added from the second class onwards to specifically address what students now thought about making mistakes (*Question 6. Has your thinking or belief about making mistakes when you speak changed this semester?*).

For Question 1, 42 students responded that they remembered the confidence activity, while 18 replied in the negative. A further 16 responses were disregarded for being unclear or for not answering the question. There was a great variety in terms of what the students could remember, but the largest response (16) concerned making mistakes, specifically that the students felt that they no longer had to fear this; *"Making mistakes is not bad thing, and every classmates will not consider and laughing at the mistakes we make"* (Student 2A), which is in line with observations made in Figure 3.

In their responses to Question 2, students often also stated how the class had helped them. For example, 19 students said that they felt more confident than before, including with their speaking; *"I'm more confident with speaking English now because my way of thinking has changed little by little. I don't think I have to be perfect now, so I can relax when I speak English"* (Student 1A). 14 students specifically mentioned that they no longer had to fear mistakes, while six said that they could now speak without hesitation. In total, 45 respondents indicated they became more positive, seven were not positive, two remained as positive as before, and 28 did not respond.

Although the data indicates that the students largely grew in confidence, there are still a large number who retain worries about their speaking as shown by the responses to Question 4 in Table 5. In total, 45 students were not worried, 32 were still worried, and five did not respond.

Table 5. *Worries reported by participants*.

Worry	Frequency
Grammar	4

Pronunciation	5
Lacking vocabulary	4
Feeling bad when can't speak well	1
Motivation	1
Fluency	4
Lack skills	1
Being understood	5
Concern about others	2
Mistakes	3
Comparing with others	1
Using academic vocabulary	1

Only seven students mentioned using some kind of strategy for managing their feelings. These included noticing the reactions of conversation partners (two students) and having a positive attitude and thinking positively (one student each). Other mentions were reflected by writing a diary, creating opportunities to speak (thereby attempting to control the situation), and practising more.

In contrast, for Question 5, 60 students report using strategies for managing their FLA, with the most popular (11 students) involving taking a different, more relaxed view about making mistakes: *"I will remember that making mistake is not bad thing"* (Student 2A). The next most numerous strategy (seven students) was students making themselves speak even though they still might feel nervous: *"Anyway, I will speak what I have to say and share"* (Student 2L).

Lastly, in response to Question 6 – *Has your thinking or belief about making mistakes when you speak changed this semester?* (52 responses), we were able to see that a large proportion of the students had developed more positive mindsets; only three stated that they had not changed. Although not all students gave a particular reason, some of the responses related to ideas brought up during the CBT-based confidence activity. For example, some students noticed the reaction of conversation partners as evidence that they did not have to be concerned about mistakes now; "*When I talk with international students and I made mistakes, they were so kind. So I am no longer afraid to make mistakes*" (Student 4E) and "*Yes. I noticed that everyone make mistakes and they don't take care of it. From this thought, I could enjoy talking*" (Student 4B). Others stated that they realised that mistakes are part of the learning process and have adopted a more balanced view: *"Yes it has. I make mistakes when I speak even Japanese. Making mistakes provide learners weakness and strength, then you can fix it!"* (Student 2E).

Other reflections gave students the opportunity to share their thoughts on how their beliefs had changed. In their final reports where they looked back on what they considered to be the most important things they had perceived about themselves as learners during the course, several

students wrote about their new perspectives on confidence. Student 2L referred to the importance of her friends, showing how class bonding is so vital:

> *"I think it is good to actually talk to my friend and output what I've learned. The more I speak English, the more I learn and the more I find out how I can speak in English. Not being afraid of making mistakes and talking is good to improve my speaking skills and I can get confidence to speak. Working with aspiring and positive members was efficient because it could change my inner self and environment. I agree with (teacher) that friends are a very valuable resource. This was really motivating for me".*

In another example, Student 2G related how she had developed a more positive view of herself due to the confidence class:

> *"Finally I'm going to tell you what I learned about the importance of "don't compare with others", I think this is the most important thing in common with the two previously mentioned. No matter how much I improve my time management and speaking skills, if I compare them with others, I will become negative and lose confidence. As I said before, I have a lot of opportunities to communicate with my teacher in this lesson, and I understand that it is important to understand whether I am growing up compared to myself in the past through learning journals and one-on-one conversations. I often underestimated myself in any situation, so this had a pretty big impact on me".*

Both examples clearly demonstrate the impact of talking directly about FLA and confidence to students, and how the CBT-inspired approach enables a shift in thinking to a much more positive and productive view of themselves in relation to their speaking skills.

Discussion

CBT-based approaches can form the cornerstone of a structured awareness-raising curriculum for FL learning and teaching (Kato & Mynard, 2015). Introducing students to different coping strategies, linked to particular learning goals such as speaking, while making them aware of resources and examples of good practice could be integrated in such a curriculum. Peeters and Mynard (2023) discussed such a curriculum design, where they prove how it can encourage students to further develop their own learning strategies, get opportunities to apply them to their own learning, and are encouraged to evaluate the application and effectiveness of the strategy in order to make future decisions about their own learning trajectory. This curriculum design is additionally supported by interactions with a learning advisor, which has been found to be a positive factor in further lowering the threshold for managing FLA inducing activities in the learning process (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). The first step of such a curriculum,

however, would be awareness raising to make students conscious of their own skills, FLA, and contextual factors that might influence their anxiety.

From the data above, it is clear that the CBT-based activity used in this study was effective at helping to decrease the FLA felt by the students involved. The large majority of students in all four classes began the course with high FLA and lacked confidence, with only three indicating that they felt positive about the scenarios. The negative feelings displayed were largely arising from beliefs that they lack linguistic skills for effective communication, and a fear of making mistakes. Previous research has shown similar trends among FL learners in higher education, as they became very careful not to make any errors out of fear to lose face, or to lose any self-esteem they have (Salim et al., 2017), which resulted in them being over-cautious and anxious to communicate. In the present study, however, over the course of the semester there appeared to be both a reduction in FLA, particularly regarding making mistakes, and an increase in confidence. Many participants had a much more balanced or positive view on the matter, indicating that their core beliefs had changed, although FLA was still present with some individuals.

One important data point regards the 'Refers to confidence class' code which increased from nine mentions in the first reflection to 22 in the second. Here, students mentioned how their perspectives changed and linked it to what they had learned from the intervention. This increase is likely due to the fact that the task required them to compare their feelings, prompting them to think about what the course itself contributed. Creating opportunities to raise this kind of awareness has proven effective in other studies, where explicit instruction has prompted students to develop metacognitive strategies, thinking about how they are performing in class and how they relate to other students (Peeters, 2015; Peeters & Ito Maitland, 2024). The present study, therefore, illustrated how reflection, structured by the teacher, can be a vital part of interventions like this. Reflection can 'transform' learning; students can turn "awareness into action and eventually experience fundamental shifts in beliefs that inform their continued practices (Mynard, 2023, p. 31). It further illustrated the importance of follow-up intervention activities, as such intervention activities are likely to be less effective if only conducted once. Further studies could also possibly examine more explicitly at what level of cognition changes occur, as well as the reasons why some students still demonstrate FLA.

It is important to acknowledge though that other factors which the study cannot account for may have also contributed to the overall decrease in FLA. Students are invariably more nervous and less confident when beginning a new course with unfamiliar peers but often become accustomed as the course progresses (Gkonou et al., 2017). The focus of this course on creating autonomous peer groups to study for shared goals undoubtedly played a role in helping students relax with each other, and the activity of having them reflect each week on their learning helped them to realise the progress they were making with their linguistic skills.

For courses in which students are not being explicitly encouraged to be autonomous, teachers may be more limited in introducing CBT-type activities. Nevertheless, integrating awareness-raising activities or reflection exercises can already lay the groundwork for growth. Teachers

in these settings could still integrate short reflection prompts or structured group discussions to raise awareness about anxiety and coping strategies. While this study's findings highlight the benefits of tailored CBT-based activities, scaffolding shorter CBT-informed practices like the ones mentioned above can be successfully adapted to other educational settings to mitigate FLA.

A particular limitation of the study is that due to absences and students not completing assignments, there are some gaps in the data. Additionally, the reliance on questionnaires for collecting participants' thoughts meant that ambiguous statements occurred. Additionally, it is important to note that the fluctuations seen in the coding trends do not necessarily mean that students ceased to think in a certain way about their confidence or FLA, but simply that at that particular point, they were choosing to reflect on something different.

Conclusion

The study demonstrated how a CBT-based intervention can be successful in helping to alleviate FLA in an English as a second language classroom. Regarding the first research question – *'How do feelings of confidence change through in-class confidence interventions based on CBT techniques?'*, students displayed a much higher degree of confidence and other positive emotions compared to the start of the course. While other factors may have influenced this change, it is clear from the students' responses that for many of them, the CBT-derived intervention was instrumental. Students were able to question their dysfunctional assumptions, both through reflection with the instructor and each other.

In response to the second research question – *'Which factors do students identify when they report on confidence changes?'*, students described more goal-oriented thinking and use of strategies in dealing with anxiety-provoking situations. Learning that they shared very similar concerns, and that their peers did not necessarily judge them negatively for it, was an important step in helping them to transform their self-images and achieving a sense of commonality. The classroom, thus, became more of a shared space where all the students could strive to improve their skills. This contrasts with the image a lot of them had, as they feared they might be singled out for not being able to do something correctly. Also, the conversation activity is important in demonstrating to each other and themselves that the students are in fact effective communicators. Learning to look for evidence of their successes enabled the students to be objective and rational in appreciating their abilities. Again, this is important when we see the initial extent in the questionnaire results to which the students believed themselves to be lacking ability to communicate. The students overall became far more relaxed about making mistakes, demonstrating a reduction in perfectionist thinking.

From an educator's perspective, seeing students lose their fear of speaking their FL together can be highly gratifying. Actively teaching them that there is no need to hold a belief if it is preventing them from achieving their potential is empowering and adds an important skill for

the regulation of emotion. This is essential in achieving autonomy and is a life-long learning skill applicable to situations beyond the language classroom. The course described in the study is dedicated to teaching self-directed learning skills, allowing us to give a great deal of attention to affective factors in learning, which may not be available to educators with less opportunity to deviate from their coursebook or syllabus. However, if it is possible to make such a positive impact on our students, we should make the opportunity to do so, "for the better students feel about themselves and others, the more likely they are to achieve" (Moskowitz, 1999, p. 178).

Acknowledgements

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Appendices

Appendix A: Example of scenario from MYE-based questionnaire

Scenario 2: *You want to say something in English in class but don't.*

You can answer in English or Japanese
英語でも日本語でも構いません

8) What kind of emotions would you experience in this situation? Mark the scale with an 'X'.

Positive ●– ● Negative

9) Please name the emotions (one or more) you would feel in this situation (maximum 10 words).

10) Why do you think you would feel this way? Please explain in a few words.

11) Have you ever encountered this situation or something like it? Circle the appropriate letter: a. Yes   b. No

12) If the answer to #11 is 'yes' (you encountered this situation or something like it before), how did you feel? Please explain in a few words.

13) Is it common for you to feel this way in this kind of situation? Mark the scale with an 'X'.

Never ●– ● Always

14) If you tried to manage your emotions in this situation, *how* did you do so? (maximum 30 words).

Appendix B: Conversation analysis questions for CBT-based class activity

- Did you make a mistake?
- Did anyone laugh because you made a mistake? If so, was it because your mistake was funny?
- Did anyone else make a mistake?
- Did you laugh because they made a mistake?
- If others make a mistake, do you think they are stupid?
- Could your partner understand you?
- How do you feel about the conversation you just had?
- Do you think your partner enjoyed it?

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