OPEN ACCESS

Language and Motivation
ISSN XXXX-XXXX
https://www.castledown.com/journals/lam/

Language and Motivation , *1* (1), 103713 (2024)
https://doi.org/10.29140/lam.v1n1.103713

Skill-specific self-efficacy and foreign language anxiety: A study of EFL learners

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between skill-specific self-efficacy and foreign language anxiety (FLA) among Japanese university EFL learners, addressing a key gap in second language acquisition research. Although FLA is known to hinder cognitive processing, participation, and performance, limited research has explored how learners' self-efficacy in the four specific language skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing shapes their anxiety. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 65 first-year Japanese university students enrolled in an advanced English elective course. Participants completed questionnaires measuring skill-specific self-efficacy, FLA, and personal and pedagogical factors. The results show substantial variation in learners' self-efficacy across skills, with the highest self-efficacy in reading and the lowest in speaking. Significant negative correlations were found between FLA and all four self-efficacy dimensions, with speaking self-efficacy demonstrating the strongest association. Regression analyses indicated that skills involving greater real-time processing demands, particularly speaking, were the strongest predictors of anxiety. Mediation analyses further revealed that perfectionism, fear of failure, teacher feedback style, and classroom atmosphere significantly mediated the relationship between speaking self-efficacy and FLA. Teacher feedback showed the largest indirect effect. These findings underscore the need for pedagogical approaches that develop skill-specific self-efficacy and address affective and contextual factors to reduce anxiety in Japanese EFL classrooms.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety, self-efficacy, Japanese EFL learners, speaking anxiety

Introduction

Learners' experiences in the language classroom emerge from the interplay between environmental factors and personal characteristics (Harumi, 2020; King, 2013). These influences vary in stability and shape how students perceive tasks, respond to challenges, and regulate their

learning. To clarify this interplay, this study organizes key constructs along a temporal continuum. It highlights how stable traits, malleable characteristics, situational emotions, and environmental factors interact in shaping learners' classroom experiences. Stable traits, such as perfectionism and fear of failure, represent relatively stable individual dispositions that shape learners' perceptions, motivation, and responses to language tasks (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Malleable characteristics, including skill-specific self-efficacy, capture learners' beliefs about their abilities in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. These are generally considered to be more dynamic and context-sensitive (Bandura, 1997). Situational emotions, such as anxiety, fluctuate depending on task demands, immediate performance pressures, and social evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2017). Finally, environmental factors, including teacher feedback style and classroom atmosphere, influence learner beliefs and anxiety (Dörnyei, 2009; Harumi, 2020).

Learning environments play a critical role in shaping foreign language anxiety (FLA) and learner engagement, as classroom dynamics, teacher behavior, and interactional practices can either mitigate or exacerbate anxiety. Harumi (2023) and King (2013) highlight that in Japanese EFL classrooms, teacher talk and moments of classroom silence actively influence learners' participation and emotional responses: silence can provide space for reflection or, if mismanaged, increase withdrawal and anxiety. Teachers' strategies, such as timing interventions, providing feedback, and using wait time, interact with learners' personal dispositions, including self-efficacy, to affect FLA and willingness to communicate. Recognizing silence as a resource rather than a problem illustrates how nuanced classroom practices can scaffold both skill development and emotional regulation, emphasizing the interplay between personal and environmental factors in language learning. Building on this, this study focuses specifically on skill-specific self-efficacy across speaking, listening, reading, and writing to better understand its influence on FLA among Japanese EFL learners.

Foreign Language Anxiety

In the field of foreign language acquisition, it is thought that affective variables, including motivation, attitude, and the willingness to communicate (WTC), significantly influence learners' performance and progression in language learning. Among these, FLA has received considerable scholarly attention. Research has consistently shown that FLA presents significant challenges for learners and may impede both foreign language acquisition and long-term success (Horwitz, 2001; Dörnyei, 2005).

Understanding the specificity of FLA is essential to distinguishing it from more generalized forms of anxiety. FLA is a distinct form of situation-specific anxiety that arises exclusively in the context of learning or using a foreign language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Unlike general anxiety disorders, FLA typically surfaces during language-related tasks in classroom settings because students are often required to perform in front of peers and instructors (Chen, 2023; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). When these anxiety-inducing episodes occur frequently, learners may begin to associate negative emotions with the language itself. This association can exacerbate their discomfort and lead to increased avoidance or disengagement from foreign language learning tasks (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014).

Horwitz et al. (1986) provided a foundational framework for understanding FLA by identifying three primary components: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Each of these dimensions captures a unique facet of the anxiety learners often face in language classrooms.

Communication apprehension refers to the anxiety learners feel when required to communicate in the target language. Learners may feel particularly uncomfortable during

oral tasks, and their anxiety often interferes with both speaking and listening, limiting their ability to effectively comprehend or respond under pressure. Fear of negative evaluation is rooted in learners' concerns about being judged or criticized by others. Students may fear making mistakes and being perceived as linguistically incompetent by teachers or peers. As a result, they may withdraw from classroom activities to avoid exposure, which can hinder their language development and self-efficacy. Test anxiety reflects the apprehension learners feel in response to formal assessments. Students experiencing this form of anxiety often worry excessively about performance and possible failure, leading to cognitive overload and impaired concentration during evaluations (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Despite the prevalence of FLA, its manifestations in classroom settings are often overlooked by language instructors. According to Ohata (2005), teachers may fail to recognize FLA in students who do not exhibit obvious physical symptoms such as visible nervousness. This may be because many teachers focus primarily on encouraging participation and fostering communicative competence, without addressing the emotional barriers learners may face. For example, emotional barriers such as boredom, disengagement, frustration, and feelings of meaninglessness can arise from repetitive tasks, unapproachable teacher behavior, or unsupportive classroom environments (Imsa-ard, 2024). However, as Gardner et al. (1997) and MacIntyre (2017) highlight, unacknowledged FLA can have serious consequences, undermining student engagement and academic outcomes. Thus, FLA should not be viewed as a transient emotional response. Rather, it should be treated as a recurring issue with lasting implications for learners' attitudes, behavior, and long-term success in foreign language acquisition.

The Role of Self-efficacy in Foreign Language Learning

Self-efficacy has emerged as a significant personal factor in foreign language learning, closely tied to learners' ability to succeed in the classroom (Hoang, 2018). Self-efficacy is one's capacity to organize and execute actions necessary to achieve specific goals, and continues to inform contemporary research (Bandura, 1997). Importantly, self-efficacy does not reflect actual skill level but rather an individual's belief of what they can accomplish (Basileo et al., 2024; Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Self-efficacy influences not only how individuals behave but also how they think and feel. Within language learning contexts, self-efficacy shapes learners' decisions, the effort they invest, the level of anxiety they experience, and their persistence when facing challenges or unfamiliar tasks (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996, 2003).

The relationship between self-efficacy and foreign language acquisition is supported by empirical studies, albeit somewhat dated, that link high self-efficacy with better academic performance (Jackson, 2002; Lane & Lane, 2001; Schunk, 1991, 2012). Sardegna (2012) reported that learners with higher self-efficacy participated more actively in learning activities and made more noticeable progress. Bandura (1997) and Gkonou (2013) emphasize the role of self-efficacy in classroom participation. This is supported by studies such as Busse and Walter (2013), who found that a decline in students' self-efficacy was linked to reduced effort and participation in classroom activities. Conversely, learners with high self-efficacy are more likely to take part in learning tasks and persist through difficulties, as shown in research by Mills et al. (2007) on language learners' classroom engagement. These findings reinforce that self-efficacy is not just a motivational concept but also a strong predictor of learning outcomes.

Self-efficacy has been shown to play an important role in skill-specific improvements among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Rather than being a general trait, self-efficacy relates directly to specific language abilities, such as speaking, listening, reading, or writing (Lake, 2013). For example, Smit (2002) and Smit and Dalton (2000) found that learners with strong self-efficacy regarding pronunciation were more

likely to improve their English accents. Yang (1999) observed that Taiwanese EFL students with higher general self-efficacy tended to employ more active strategies, such as mimicking native speakers, to enhance their fluency. Lake (2013) emphasizes that self-efficacy can be both task- and skill-specific in EFL and ESL contexts, highlighting the importance of examining self-efficacy at the level of individual language skills. Skill-specific self-efficacy can be understood as a proximal motivational construct that interacts with broader motivational processes. Learners' beliefs in individual language skills influence their self-regulation strategies, goal-setting, and persistence when facing challenging tasks (Zimmerman, 2000). This may mitigate the intensity of skill-specific foreign language anxiety.

It is important to note that significant gaps remain in the self-efficacy literature related to EFL learners. Hoang (2018) conducted a systematic review of teacher self-efficacy research from 2002 to 2017, highlighting trends in studies conducted primarily in Middle Eastern contexts. However, this work does not directly address learner self-efficacy. In other research, a literature review by Raofi et al. (2012) summarized how self-efficacy has been studied in second/foreign language learning, highlighting distinctions between general and skill-specific self-efficacy. Similarly, Gunawan et al. (2024) reviewed 25 studies from 2013 to 2023 and noted that while some research has addressed skill-specific self-efficacy, comparative studies across all four core skills remain scarce, particularly in diverse EFL contexts outside the Middle East.

According to Lin et al. (2025), malleable characteristics, such as learners' self-efficacy, interact with anxiety to influence classroom behavior. This aligns with research showing that skill-specific self-efficacy in EFL contexts can mitigate the negative effects of FLA. (Bandura, 1997; Lake, 2013). These findings highlight the importance of considering both environmental and learner-specific factors when designing interventions to support engagement in language classrooms.

In addition to social-cognitive perspectives, contemporary motivational frameworks such as self-determination theory may provide a useful lens for interpreting the relationship between self-efficacy and FLA. Within this framework, self-efficacy can be understood as closely related to learners' perceived competence, one of the three basic psychological needs underlying motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When learners feel capable of performing language tasks, they are more likely to engage actively and experience lower levels of anxiety. However, when their sense of competence is undermined, learners may experience heightened anxiety and reduced motivation. From this perspective, FLA can be interpreted as an affective response associated with undermined competence. This conceptualization complements social-cognitive accounts by situating self-efficacy within a broader motivational system that integrates emotional and contextual influences on learning.

Rationale for the Study

FLA is a significant affective variable in second language acquisition. It often hinders learners' cognitive processing, classroom participation, and motivation (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). While the detrimental effects of FLA are well-documented, most research focuses on its outcomes. This includes outcomes such as reduced language performance or avoidance behaviors. One of the most influential factors in second language acquisition is learners' self-efficacy. This affects their motivation and emotional engagement, and anxiety levels (Bandura, 1997; Gist & Mitchell, 1992). However, much of the existing research treats self-efficacy as a general construct. (e.g., "I am confident in my ability to learn English"). However, this may overlook variations across language skills. Therefore, this study adopts a task-specific approach, assessing learners' confidence in performing concrete language tasks. For example, "Express your opinions clearly in a group discussion" or "Understand the main idea of a

lecture in English". Language learners' self-efficacy can vary substantially between skills such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Lake, 2013). This potentially obscures the nuanced ways in which learners experience confidence and anxiety across different language skills. For instance, speaking tasks often require immediate interaction and carry a high risk of negative evaluation. This makes speaking self-efficacy especially salient for FLA. In contrast, reading and writing tasks allow more time for processing and error correction, making self-efficacy in these domains less directly tied to moment-to-moment anxiety. By examining skill-specific self-efficacy, researchers can more precisely capture how learners' beliefs in their abilities shape emotional responses to different language tasks.

This approach is particularly relevant in contexts such as Japanese higher education. This is because in Japanese education, cultural and pedagogical factors, such as emphasis on exam-based assessment, classroom norms that discourage mistakes, and an aversion to public errors, may amplify anxiety in productive skills like speaking (Sakamoto, 2023). By focusing on skill-specific self-efficacy, the present study aims to illuminate how learners' self-efficacy in distinct language domains contributes to FLA. It also aims to provide actionable insights for pedagogical interventions tailored to each skill. Accordingly, this study investigates the relationship between skill-specific self-efficacy and FLA among Japanese EFL learners, as well as the personal, pedagogical, and cultural factors that affect this relationship. The research question guiding this study is: *What is the relationship between skill-specific self-efficacy and FLA among Japanese university EFL learners, and which personal, pedagogical, and cultural factors mediate this relationship?*

While motivation is widely understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing factors such as goal orientation, task value, and learner autonomy, the present study focuses specifically on self-efficacy as a proximal and measurable component of motivation. This focus is consistent with social-cognitive perspectives on motivation (e.g., Bandura, 1997) and with L2 motivational frameworks that emphasize the interaction of multiple components (e.g., Dörnyei, 2009). Other motivational dimensions are not directly examined in the statistical analyses but are considered in the interpretation of findings. This focused approach allows for a more precise examination of how learners' beliefs about their capabilities relate to foreign language anxiety, while acknowledging that these beliefs operate within a broader motivational system.

By emphasizing skill-specific self-efficacy, this study aims to contribute both theoretically and pedagogically. Theoretically, by refining the understanding of the interplay between self-efficacy and anxiety in foreign language learning. Pedagogically, by informing strategies that support learners in skills where anxiety is most acute.

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, correlational research design to examine relationships between Japanese EFL learners' skill-specific self-efficacy and their levels of FLA. A cross-sectional survey approach allows the simultaneous collection of data on multiple psychological and pedagogical constructs from a single learner cohort. This design enabled efficient examination of theoretically motivated associations and comparison of patterns across variables. It is also appropriate as an initial investigation of complex learner-internal relationships.

Cross-sectional survey designs are well established in second language acquisition research and have been widely used to investigate individual difference variables such as self-efficacy and FLA. Such designs allow researchers to capture a snapshot of how relevant constructs co-occur within a given population and to identify systematic patterns of association and group differences (Dörnyei, 2007; Mackey & Gass, 2016). Moreover, syntheses of the FLA literature

have drawn predominantly on findings from cross-sectional studies. For example, an analysis by Botes et al. (2020) demonstrated a robust, moderate negative relationship between FLA and academic achievement across diverse contexts. Their study illustrates the cumulative contribution of cross-sectional research to theory development in this domain.

This study incorporated regression-based and mediation analyses to explore both direct and indirect associations among variables. This analytic framework was selected based on prior theoretical and empirical work suggesting that self-efficacy is closely intertwined with affective experiences in the language classroom (Bandura, 1997; Dörnyei, 2005; MacIntyre, 2017), and that learner-internal and contextual variables may be related to foreign language anxiety both directly and indirectly through learners' self-beliefs (Horwitz et al., 1986; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Conceptually, self-efficacy is positioned as a proximal psychological construct within the proposed relational model. This makes mediation a theoretically meaningful approach for examining how variables are statistically interconnected.

Importantly, mediation analysis in the present study is employed as a statistical tool to examine patterns of indirect association rather than to establish causal or temporal relationships. Given the cross-sectional nature of the data, the proposed mediation models do not permit inferences about directionality or causality. Instead, indirect effects are interpreted as evidence that relationships among variables are structured in a manner consistent with the underlying theoretical framework. Accordingly, the findings are interpreted with appropriate caution, and the study is positioned as contributing to theory building. It aims to do this by identifying meaningful associations that warrant further investigation using longitudinal or process-oriented research designs.

Participants

The study involved 65 Japanese university students (28 male and 37 female) who were taking an advanced elective English course at a university in Japan. These students had chosen to take a challenging English course beyond the required curriculum. This suggests that they may have a relatively higher willingness to study English and have some degree of self-efficacy in language learning. Prior to participating in this study, the participants were provided with detailed information about the research aims, procedures, and their rights as participants, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written informed consent (see Appendix 4) was obtained from each participant. Participants were assured that all data would be anonymized, and any identifying information would be kept strictly confidential.

While the sample size is modest, it is consistent with classroom-based research in second language acquisition, where access to intact learner groups and practical constraints often limit large-scale data collection (Dörnyei, 2007; Mackey & Gass, 2016). The study does not aim to make broad population-level generalizations. It seeks to examine theoretical associations among self-efficacy, FLA, and pedagogical variables. The homogeneous nature of the sample reduces extraneous variability and allows for more sensitive examination of relationships among psychological constructs. Accordingly, the findings are interpreted as context-specific and hypothesis-generating. This provides a basis for future research with larger and more diverse samples.

Instrumentation

This study employed a series of questionnaires to examine learners' self-efficacy, FLA, and a range of personal and pedagogical factors that may be related to their learning experiences. The instruments were designed to capture both cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning, as well as contextual elements related to classroom dynamics and individual learner

characteristics. All questionnaires were translated into Japanese to ensure clarity and accessibility for the participants, and to reduce the likelihood that language proficiency would influence their responses. The translations were reviewed by two bilingual English-Japanese language educators to confirm accuracy, cultural appropriateness, and conceptual equivalence with the original items. The development, adaptation, and validation procedures for each instrument are described below.

1. Skill-Specific Self-Efficacy Scale: Learners' perceived self-efficacy in English language learning was measured using a task-specific self-efficacy questionnaire (Appendix 1) developed in accordance with Bandura's (1997) theoretical framework. The scale was designed specifically for the Japanese EFL context and aimed to assess learners' self-efficacy in performing concrete language tasks across the four core skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Item generation was informed by three sources: Bandura's guidelines for constructing self-efficacy scales, emphasizing task specificity and gradation of difficulty; existing skill-based self-efficacy instruments used in EFL research; and common classroom tasks and communicative demands observed in Japanese university English courses. An initial pool of items was reviewed for clarity and contextual relevance, resulting in a final set of 20 items, with five items per skill.

Participants rated their confidence using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Not confident at all") to 7 ("Completely confident"). Prior to the main study, the scale was piloted with a small group from a comparable population to check item clarity and response variability, leading to minor wording adjustments. Internal consistency was examined for the full scale and for each skill subscale. In addition, exploratory analyses of item groupings were conducted to confirm alignment with the intended four-skill structure.

2. Foreign Language Anxiety Scale: Foreign language anxiety was assessed using an adapted version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986) (Appendix 2). Adaptation was guided by prior research suggesting that anxiety experiences may vary across language skills and classroom contexts in Japanese EFL settings. Item selection and modification were informed by the original FLCAS, previous Japanese-context adaptations, and classroom observations. Items were revised to enhance contextual relevance and reduce redundancy while retaining conceptual fidelity to the original construct. The final instrument consisted of 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree").

The adapted scale was designed to represent three theoretically established dimensions of FLA: Communication Apprehension (Items 1–4), Fear of Negative Evaluation (Items 5–8), and Test Anxiety (Items 9–12). Subscale structure was examined through internal consistency analysis, and item groupings were reviewed to ensure conceptual coherence with Horwitz et al.'s original framework. Reliability coefficients for the overall scale and subscales indicated satisfactory internal consistency.

3. Personal and Pedagogical Factors Questionnaire: A supplementary questionnaire (Appendix 3) was developed to assess potential mediating variables influencing the relationship between self-efficacy and FLA. This instrument targeted four constructs identified in the literature as relevant to affective and motivational processes in language learning: (1) perfectionism, (2) fear of failure, (3) teacher feedback style, and (4) classroom atmosphere. Item development was theory-driven and informed by prior empirical studies in Japanese and East Asian educational contexts (e.g., Harumi, 2020; King, 2013; Watanabe, 2023). For each construct, multiple Likert-scale items were created to capture learners' subjective perceptions and to enhance reliability. Draft items were reviewed for clarity and relevance, and minor revisions were made following informal piloting. Internal consistency was examined

for each construct, and item groupings were evaluated to ensure conceptual alignment with the intended mediators. While these scales were developed specifically for the present study, the item design and validation procedures were grounded in established theory and prior research, supporting their construct relevance.

Findings

Descriptive statistics revealed variation in students' self-efficacy across language skills and their overall levels of FLA. As can be seen in Table 1, participants reported the highest self-efficacy in reading (M = 5.23, SD = 1.00), followed by writing (M = 4.75, SD = 1.08), listening (M = 4.62, SD = 1.05), and speaking (M = 3.85, SD = 1.12). This pattern suggests that students generally feel less confident in oral production tasks compared to receptive or written skills. The average FLA score (M = 3.92, SD = 0.95) indicates a moderate level of anxiety. This shows considerable variation across participants (range: 1.5 to 6.8). All scales demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.86, supporting the reliability of the measures.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for skill-specific self-efficacy and foreign language anxiety (N = 65)

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Cronbach's α
Speaking Self-efficacy	3.85	1.12	1	7	0.89
Listening Self-efficacy	4.62	1.05	2	7	0.86
Reading Self-efficacy	5.23	1.00	3	7	0.88
Writing Self-efficacy	4.75	1.08	2	7	0.87
FLA Score	3.92	0.95	1.5	6.8	0.91

Pearson correlation coefficients are seen in Table 2. The four dimensions of skill-specific self-efficacy demonstrated a negative relationship with FLA. The strongest inverse correlation was found between speaking self-efficacy and FLA ($r = –0.65$, $p < .01$), followed by listening ($r = –0.51$), writing ($r = –0.49$), and reading ($r = –0.45$). These results confirm that learners with higher self-efficacy across specific skills tend to experience lower levels of anxiety in the language classroom. Speaking self-efficacy shows the most robust association.

Table 2. Pearson correlation matrix between skill-specific self-efficacy and FLA (N = 65)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Speaking Self-efficacy	—				
2. Listening Self-efficacy	0.42**	—			
3. Reading Self-efficacy	0.38**	0.47**	—		
4. Writing Self-efficacy	0.44**	0.39**	0.50**	—	
5. FLA	–0.65**	–0.51**	–0.45**	–0.49**	—

Note: **p < .01.

To examine the predictive power of skill-specific self-efficacy on FLA, a multiple regression analysis was conducted (see Table 3). The overall model was statistically significant: $F(4, 60) = 16.26$, $p < .001$, explaining 52% of the variance in FLA ($R^2 = 0.52$). Among the four

predictors, speaking self-efficacy emerged as the strongest and most significant predictor (β = –0.52, p < .001). This suggests that lower self-efficacy in speaking tasks is closely associated with higher anxiety levels. Listening (β = –0.22, p = .040) and writing self-efficacy (β = –0.20, p = .028) were also significant predictors. However, reading self-efficacy did not reach statistical significance (p = .123). These findings suggest that productive skills, particularly speaking, are more influential in predicting anxiety levels than receptive ones.

Table 3. Multiple regression predicting foreign language anxiety from skill-specific self-efficacy (N = 65)

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Speaking Self-efficacy	–0.48	0.11	–0.52	–4.36	< .001
Listening Self-efficacy	–0.21	0.10	–0.22	–2.10	0.040
Reading Self-efficacy	–0.14	0.09	–0.15	–1.56	0.123
Writing Self-efficacy	–0.18	0.08	–0.20	–2.25	0.028

Note: Model summary: $R^2 = 0.52$, $F(4, 60) = 16.26$, $p < .001$.

A mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether individual traits and perceptions of the learning environment were statistically associated with the relationship between speaking self-efficacy and FLA. Table 4 presents the estimated indirect effects for each mediator. Of the four mediators, teacher feedback style showed the strongest effect. These results are consistent with possible explanatory pathways. However, they should be interpreted as associations rather than evidence of causal mechanisms, given the cross-sectional design of the study.

Table 4. Mediation analysis — indirect effects of personal and pedagogical factors on the relationship between speaking self-efficacy and FLA (N = 65)

Mediator	Indirect Effect (B)	Bootstrapped 95% CI	Significance
Perfectionism	–0.12	[–0.23, –0.04]	Significant
Fear of Failure	–0.08	[–0.18, –0.01]	Significant
Teacher Feedback Style	–0.15	[–0.28, –0.07]	Significant
Classroom Atmosphere	–0.10	[–0.20, –0.03]	Significant

Overall, these results indicate that individual traits and perceptions of the learning environment are associated with the link between speaking self-efficacy and anxiety. The strongest association was observed for teacher feedback style. This suggests that learners' perceptions of instructional communication may play an important role in shaping affective experiences.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between skill-specific self-efficacy and FLA among Japanese university EFL learners. The findings contribute to broader motivation research by highlighting how learners' beliefs in specific language skills function as a motivational mechanism shaping engagement and emotional experience. Consistent with social-cognitive and

process-oriented models of motivation, the results suggest that learners' motivation in the language classroom is not uniform or global. Instead, it varies across skills in response to task demands, evaluative pressure, and instructional context (Bandura, 1997; Dörnyei, 2009).

From this perspective, FLA can be understood not only as an affective reaction. It can also be understood as an outcome of underlying motivational processes related to expectancy beliefs, self-regulation, and identity development. The strong association between speaking self-efficacy and FLA indicates that learners' beliefs about their ability to perform specific tasks. Skill-specific self-efficacy mediates how learners interpret classroom challenges, regulate effort, and persist in the face of difficulty. In doing so, linking broader motivational orientations to moment-to-moment classroom behavior (Zimmerman, 2000). The following discussion interprets the descriptive, correlational, and mediation findings to illustrate how variations in skill-specific self-efficacy relate to foreign language anxiety and to broader motivational patterns in Japanese EFL classrooms.

Descriptive results revealed clear variation in learners' self-efficacy across the four core language skills. The participants exhibited the highest self-efficacy in reading and the lowest in speaking. This pattern aligns with the linguistic and educational context of Japan, where English instruction has traditionally emphasized receptive and form-focused skills over communicative competence. The relatively low speaking self-efficacy observed among participants likely reflects a classroom culture where mistakes are often stigmatized (Watanabe, 2023).

The mean FLA score ($M = 3.92$) indicates a moderate level of anxiety. This suggests that even among Japanese EFL students who elected to take an elective advanced course, language learning tends to still elicit anxiety. This finding underscores the persistent salience of FLA in Japanese higher education and supports Horwitz's (2016) argument that FLA remains prevalent even among learners who elect to take an advanced English course.

Correlational analyses confirmed an inverse relationship between self-efficacy and FLA across all four skills, consistent with Bandura's (1997) social-cognitive theory. However, the strength of these relationships varied by skill. Speaking self-efficacy demonstrated the strongest association with FLA, followed by listening and writing, while reading was not a significant predictor. The prominence of speaking aligns with extensive prior research identifying oral performance as a primary source of anxiety in East Asian EFL classrooms. In these contexts, public performance and fear of negative evaluation are particularly salient (Harumi, 2020; King, 2013).

Importantly, listening is typically categorized as a receptive skill. However, its strong association with FLA suggests that the most relevant distinction for anxiety may not be receptivity versus productivity per se. Instead, it may be the immediacy and time pressure involved in processing language. Both speaking and listening typically require real-time comprehension and response. In contrast, reading and writing often allow greater temporal flexibility. This may reduce performance pressure and buffer anxiety. From this perspective, anxiety appears more closely tied to skills that involve rapid processing than to skill type alone.

These findings reinforce the value of a skill-specific approach to self-efficacy. The findings do this by demonstrating that learners' self-efficacy may vary across skills and relates differently to anxiety depending on the cognitive and interactional demands involved. Treating self-efficacy as a global construct would obscure these nuanced patterns and limit the understanding of how anxiety is experienced across different language activities.

The present findings complement Leeming's (2017) investigation of speaking self-efficacy among Japanese university EFL learners, which documented growth in speaking self-efficacy over time within a communicatively oriented course. Building on this, this study examines self-efficacy across the four language skills and its relationship with FLA. The findings suggest

that communicatively oriented courses, similar to those studied by Leeming, may be particularly valuable in fostering speaking self-efficacy, which appears closely tied to learners' affective experiences in the classroom.

The mediation analysis further clarified the roles of personal and pedagogical factors in these relationships. Perfectionism, fear of failure, teacher feedback style, and classroom atmosphere all showed significant indirect associations. This suggests that both internal dispositions and environmental perceptions are meaningfully related to learners' affective experiences. Among these, teacher feedback style demonstrated the strongest mediating relationship, underscoring the central role of teacher-student interaction in shaping anxiety. Supportive, process-oriented feedback may strengthen self-efficacy and reduce fear of failure. However, overly evaluative feedback may heighten self-doubt and anxiety (Park, 2014).

Overall, the findings suggest that FLA emerges from the interaction between learners' skill-specific self-efficacy and the cognitive, temporal, and social demands of classroom tasks, as shaped by pedagogical practices and cultural norms. Recognizing these distinctions could have important implications for instruction. This highlights the need for targeted support in high-pressure, real-time language activities and for classroom environments that reduce evaluative threat while fostering learner belief.

This underscores the central role of teacher-student interaction in either alleviating or exacerbating anxiety. Supportive, process-oriented feedback can reinforce self-efficacy by validating effort and incremental progress. However, overly critical feedback may heighten fear of failure and self-doubt (Park, 2014). The significant mediation effects of perfectionism and fear of failure also align with findings in Asian educational psychology that link performance pressure and error avoidance to heightened anxiety (Watanabe, 2023). Finally, a positive classroom atmosphere appears to buffer the negative effects of low self-efficacy. This reflects the social dimension of language learning emphasized in Dörnyei's (2009) motivational framework.

Theoretical and Pedagogical Contributions

This study makes important theoretical contributions by adopting a skill-specific approach to self-efficacy and FLA. Traditional research often treats self-efficacy and anxiety as global constructs. However, this study disaggregates self-efficacy into the four core language skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and examines their distinct relationships with FLA. The findings show that speaking self-efficacy has the strongest inverse relationship with anxiety. While productive skills like speaking appear closely linked to FLA, listening, although a receptive skill, also demonstrates a substantial association. This may be because both speaking and listening require rapid processing and real-time responses. In contrast, reading and writing allow learners more time to plan and monitor their output, which may buffer anxiety. These results suggest that the immediacy of language processing, rather than a strict distinction between productive and receptive skills, may be a key factor in learners' anxiety experiences.

This study extends Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory by showing that domain-specific self-efficacy is associated with anxiety in second language learning. It provides a more nuanced view than global measures of self-efficacy, and aligns with social-cognitive theory by indicating that learners with higher levels of self-efficacy tend to report lower levels of anxiety in class. In addition, the study examines personal and pedagogical factors, such as perfectionism, fear of failure, teacher feedback style, and classroom atmosphere. This study also provides insights into potential contributors to the relationship between self-efficacy and FLA. By considering both internal dispositions and external learning environments, it highlights interactions between individual traits and educational context that may influence anxiety. The study also

accounts for cultural and classroom-specific factors, including the emphasis on receptive skills and the stigmatization of errors in Japanese oral performance. Thus, illustrating the relevance of culturally sensitive theoretical models.

These personal, pedagogical, and cultural influences can be more clearly understood through motivational frameworks grounded in learners' perceptions of competence and self-concept. From a self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) perspective, these results highlight the central role of perceived competence as a driver of motivation and emotional experience. Speaking and listening, which require immediate processing and public performance, appear to be the skills in which learners' competence needs are most fragile. Lower self-efficacy in these skills is associated with heightened anxiety. This may undermine autonomous motivation by shifting learners toward controlled forms of engagement. On the other hand, reading and writing afford greater opportunities for planning and self-regulation, supporting a stronger sense of competence and, consequently, lower anxiety.

The findings also align with L2 self-approaches. In particular, Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System. Speaking self-efficacy can be interpreted as closely tied to learners' ideal L2 self because oral communication is often the most salient marker of becoming a competent L2 user. When learners perceive a gap between their actual speaking ability and their ideal L2 self, anxiety may intensify, weakening motivational trajectories. A skill-specific lens, therefore, may help explain why motivational vision may be especially vulnerable in speaking-focused contexts. Pedagogically, this implies that speaking instruction should be structured in ways that allow learners to experience attainable success and alignment with their ideal L2 self. This is because repeated anxiety-inducing speaking experiences may weaken motivational vision rather than strengthen it.

Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for both EFL pedagogy and learner support in Japanese higher education contexts. The pronounced negative relationship between speaking self-efficacy and FLA suggests that interventions aimed at enhancing learners' self-efficacy in oral production may yield substantial reductions in anxiety levels. Rather than focusing exclusively on isolated oral production, language instructors could incorporate interactional speaking-and-listening tasks. For example, using tasks such as scaffolded dialogues, role-plays, and information-gap activities may be effective. This would require learners to both comprehend and respond in real time. This is particularly relevant given that the analysis showed relatively low levels of listening self-efficacy alongside speaking self-efficacy. Such tasks can provide structured, low-stakes opportunities for learners to develop mastery experiences, which Bandura (1997) identifies as a key source of self-efficacy. Prioritizing speaking skills, alongside consistent feedback that emphasizes effort and progress rather than only outcomes, may therefore be a particularly effective strategy to mitigate anxiety and promote greater willingness to communicate in English. From a self-determination theory perspective, such competence-supportive task design and feedback practices can strengthen learners' sense of autonomy and perceived competence. This may help reduce anxiety in high-demand skills and foster more sustained motivation.

The mediation effects of personal and pedagogical factors highlight the need for a holistic approach to language learning that considers both individual dispositions and environmental conditions. Educators should be attentive to learners' fear of failure, providing reassurance and strategies for coping with mistakes to prevent these traits from exacerbating anxiety. Similarly, fostering a supportive classroom atmosphere and employing constructive, process-oriented feedback can directly enhance learners' self-efficacy while reducing FLA. These findings

underscore that affective experiences in language learning are not solely determined by learners' abilities. They may be related to interpersonal interactions and classroom climate, making teacher awareness and intentional pedagogical design critical.

Finally, the study's results suggest broader implications for curriculum design and policy in EFL education. Because productive skills, particularly speaking, show the strongest association with anxiety within the same modality, language programs might consider adjusting their instructional focus to ensure uniformity across all skills. In particular, giving ample attention to communicative competence. Integrating affective support measures, such as anxiety-reduction workshops, peer mentoring, or reflective learning activities, could further enhance learner engagement and long-term language acquisition. In combination, these pedagogical and institutional strategies could help create learning environments that not only build skill-specific competence but also foster the psychological resilience necessary for sustained success in English language learning. Moreover, by supporting learners' confidence in spoken communication, such curricular and institutional measures may help maintain alignment with learners' ideal L2 selves (Dörnyei, 2005). This may prevent repeated anxiety-inducing experiences from undermining long-term motivational vision.

Limitations

While this research contributed theoretically and pedagogically, there are limitations to note. First, the study employed a cross-sectional survey design. This results in capturing learners' speaking self-efficacy and FLA at a single point in time. As a result, the study does not account for developmental processes or fluctuations in these constructs. It also does not capture how self-efficacy or anxiety may evolve in response to specific classroom events, instructional practices, or interactional experiences. Consequently, the findings reflect patterns of association rather than dynamic processes or causal relationships.

Secondly, the study's limitations center on its relatively small sample (N = 65), drawn exclusively from Japanese university EFL learners. The relatively small sample size restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Learners of different ages, proficiency levels, or educational backgrounds may demonstrate distinct linguistic behaviors or motivational patterns. In addition, cultural or institutional factors unique to the Japanese university context may have influenced the results in ways not applicable elsewhere.

Additionally, the study relied solely on self-reported questionnaires. While these provide useful insights into learner perceptions, they are vulnerable to bias and inaccurate self-evaluation. This may potentially reduce the reliability of the data. Specifically, while the adapted FLCAS captures general FLA, it does not provide skill-specific anxiety measures. As a result, the study examines relationships between skill-specific self-efficacy and general FLA rather than pairing each self-efficacy subscale with a corresponding anxiety subscale. Future research could incorporate more granular, skill-specific anxiety measures to provide a more precise understanding of how self-efficacy in each language skill relates to corresponding anxiety experiences.

To address these limitations, future research should employ larger, more heterogeneous samples across varied cultural and educational contexts and incorporate multiple data sources. For instance, researchers could employ observational measures, performance-based assessments, or longitudinal tracking to triangulate findings and more accurately capture learners' behaviors and developmental trajectories.

Conclusion

This study suggests that skill-specific self-efficacy may be a critical determinant of FLA among Japanese university EFL learners, with speaking self-efficacy emerging as the strongest

predictor. By disaggregating self-efficacy into speaking, listening, reading, and writing, the research highlights that anxiety appears more closely tied to skills that involve rapid processing, such as speaking and listening, rather than to skill type alone. The findings also suggest that examining self-efficacy at the skill-specific level provides meaningful insight into learners' anxiety patterns and that speaking and listening self-efficacy may be relevant to broader affective variables in the classroom, such as emotional engagement and motivation.

The research further illuminates the mediating roles of personal and pedagogical factors, including perfectionism, fear of failure, teacher feedback style, and classroom atmosphere. These findings suggest that anxiety is shaped not only by internal dispositions but also by the learning environment. As such, highlighting the importance of supportive, process-oriented feedback and emotionally safe classrooms. Pedagogically, the results advocate for skill-specific interventions, targeted speaking activities, and affective scaffolding to reduce FLA and build learner self-efficacy. By integrating these strategies, educators can adopt a holistic, learner-centered approach that addresses both cognitive and emotional dimensions of language acquisition.

The findings also point to several directions for future motivation research. Methodologically, longitudinal and process-oriented designs would help capture how self-efficacy and anxiety co-develop over time within specific language skills. Theoretically, further work is needed to integrate skill-specific self-efficacy into broader motivational frameworks. This can examine how it interacts with constructs such as goals, task value, and learner identity. Pedagogically, the results suggest the importance of designing classroom practices that support learners' confidence in high-pressure, real-time skills such as speaking and listening, particularly through feedback and classroom environments that reduce anxiety.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Skill-Specific Self-Efficacy Scale

Instructions: How confident are you that you can perform each of the following tasks in English? Please rate your confidence on a scale from 1 (Not confident at all) to 7 (Completely confident).

Speaking Self-Efficacy							
1. Introduce yourself to someone in English.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. Express your opinions clearly in a group discussion.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. Ask follow-up questions during a conversation.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. Give a short presentation on a familiar topic.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. Respond to unexpected questions in English.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Listening Self-Efficacy							
6. Understand the main idea of a lecture in English.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. Follow classroom instructions given in English.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. Understand different accents when listening to English.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. Comprehend spoken English in a group discussion.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. Understand audio/video materials without subtitles.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Reading Self-Efficacy							
11. Understand academic articles in English.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. Read and summarize a news article.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. Guess the meaning of unknown words from context.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. Read and follow written instructions for a task.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. Identify key information in a reading passage.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Writing Self-Efficacy							
16. Write an organized essay in English.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. Take notes from a lecture or reading.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. Use appropriate grammar in writing.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19. Write emails or messages for academic purposes.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20. Revise your writing based on feedback.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Appendix 2: Foreign Language Anxiety Scale

Instructions: Indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement about your English learning experience. Use a scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

Communication Apprehension

1. I get nervous when I have to speak English in front of the class.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I feel anxious when I cannot express my thoughts clearly in English.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I get nervous when speaking English with native speakers.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I feel comfortable participating in English class discussions.	1	2	3	4	5

Fear of Negative Evaluation

5. I worry about making mistakes when speaking English.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I am afraid that my classmates will laugh at me if I make a mistake.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I feel anxious when I think my teacher is judging my English.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I feel confident that others understand my English.	1	2	3	4	5

Test Anxiety

9. I feel anxious before English exams or tests.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I panic when I don't know how to answer a question on an English test.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I worry more about English tests than tests in other subjects.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I feel calm during English quizzes or assessments.	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix 3: Personal and Pedagogical Factors Questionnaire

Instructions: Rate the following statements based on your experience in English classes. Use a scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

Perfectionism

1. I get upset if I don't perform perfectly in English.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I expect a lot from myself in language learning.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I am very critical of my English abilities.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Even small mistakes in English make me feel like I've failed.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I feel pressure to always get everything right in English class.	1	2	3	4	5

Fear of Failure

6. I avoid speaking in English because I might make a mistake.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I worry about failing in front of others during English tasks.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I feel anxious when I think others may judge my English negatively.	1	2	3	4	5
9. The fear of doing poorly in English affects my performance.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I hesitate to try new things in English for fear of failing.	1	2	3	4	5

Teacher Feedback Style

11. My teacher provides feedback that helps me improve.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I feel encouraged when my teacher gives me feedback.	1	2	3	4	5
13. My teacher's feedback focuses on what I did well.	1	2	3	4	5
14. My teacher gives feedback in a respectful and supportive way.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I understand clearly what my teacher expects from me.	1	2	3	4	5

Classroom Atmosphere

16. I feel supported by my classmates in English class.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I feel safe to express my opinions in English.	1	2	3	4	5
18. The classroom atmosphere helps reduce my anxiety.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I feel included and respected in English class.	1	2	3	4	5
20. The classroom environment encourages me to speak up in English.	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix 4: Consent Form for Participants

I, ..., have read the information contained in the Information Sheet for Participants and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
Yes/No

I agree to participate in this project, realising that I may withdraw at any time.
Yes/No

I agree that research data gathered for the study may be quoted and published using a pseudonym.
Yes/No

I am 18 years of age or over.
Yes/No

.....	.....
Participant	Date
.....	.....
Researcher	Date