Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Behavior and Students' Language Anxiety

Satomi Fujii (Graduate School of Hokkaido University)

Abstract

Language anxiety is one of the affective factors influencing second language learning. The objective of this study is to clarify what kind of teachers' behavior, especially teachers' questioning and feedback may induce students' language anxiety in high school English classrooms. The research questions for the study are: 1) What kind of questioning and feedback do teachers aim to provide for students? 2) What kind of teachers' questioning and feedback give rise to students' language anxiety? The research was conducted with an open-ended questionnaire. Participants were 39 high school students and 6 high school English teachers in Sapporo, Japan. The data were analyzed qualitatively. Three applied linguists divided the responses from the teachers and students into meaning clusters, categorized these into factors, and investigated the relations among the factors. The results found agreements as well as mismatches between teachers' and students' perceptions of anxiety.

1. Introduction

Learners are subject to feelings of vulnerability in second language classrooms. They are under pressure to use the target language, and exposed to situations where they may fail by making mistakes throughout a lesson. In second language acquisition studies, it has been argued that students' anxiety is an obstruction in developing a second language interlanguage (Krashen, 1982). However, only a small body of investigations of this particular variable has been published, much smaller than that related to other learner factors such as learning strategies and motivation. The Course of Study for senior high schools (MEXT, 2009) has been revised, and teachers are strongly encouraged to use English as the medium of instruction in the classroom. This means, English is expected to be the means of communication in Japanese high school English classrooms. Under this circumstance, students' anxiety will increase in significance, and it is important to investigate.

This article reports of small scale qualitative research project using open-ended questionnaires with teachers and students in a high school in Japan. It provides information of how teachers attempt to communicate with students without inducing anxiety and the attitudes students have towards this teaching. The study will provide details to help clarify the teacher's perceptions and beliefs on classroom behaviors and students' reactions to them. It is hoped that the study will contribute to further investigations of language anxiety in larger scale quantitative and qualitative studies.

2. Literature Review

Anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry which arises in the autonomic nervous system (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Many studies have reported that anxiety affects second language (L2) learning (Scovel, 1978; Ely, 1986; Horwitz et al, 1986; Young, 1991; Oxford, 1999; and others). Anxiety can be classified into three types: trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). One aspect of situation-specific anxiety is language anxiety in that learners may feel anxiety in situations where they are exposed to a specific language. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) described language anxiety as the fear or apprehension arising when a learner is expected to perform in a second or foreign language.

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) defined a notion of foreign language anxiety which is the potential source of anxiety in language classrooms. They developed a 33-item scale, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). This is a commonly used scale for foreign language anxiety. Similarly, to measure anxiety among learners, other anxiety scales have been developed by many researchers (Ely 1986; Young, 1990; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Since the 1990s, anxiety scales for Japanese learners of English have also been developed as well (Hojo, 1995; Kondo & Yang, 2003). These anxiety scales have made it possible to identify the sources of language anxiety.

According to Young (1991), there are six sources of language anxiety: 1) personal and interpersonal anxieties; 2) learner beliefs about language learning; 3) instructor beliefs about language teaching; 4) instructor-learner interactions; 5) classroom procedures; and 6) language testing. Among these six

sources, the fourth, instructor-learner interactions deserves further attention because classroom interactions are considered to be an important factor in high school English classrooms in Japan (MEXT, 2009; Tanaka, 2011). In addition, according to Macky and Goo (2007), it is important to investigate the role that individual learner factors (such as anxiety) play in mediating the effects of interactions in L2 acquisition. Therefore, examining students' anxiety with classroom interactions will be useful, however the number of such research studies are fewer than studies of other individual factors such as learning strategies and motivation.

Teachers' questioning and feedback constitute a large part of instructor-learner interactions. Especially in Japan, classroom interactions are mainly initiated by teachers. In general, students rarely initiate interactions, arguably due to their personality or due to cultural norms. Thus, it is possible that teachers' attitudes have an impact on students' affective factors including anxiety. Young (1991), related to instructor-learner interactions, states that a "strong source of anxiety is being called on to respond orally in the target language (p.429)" and that a "harsh manner of correcting student error is often cited as provoking anxiety (ibid)." These statements suggest that due to teachers' questioning and feedback, learners' anxiety levels vary. The present study aims to determine whether this holds with Japanese high school students.

In the previous studies, Price (1991) as well as Koch and Terrell (1991) have examined anxieties related to instructor-learner interactions. Price (1991) interviewed 10 anxious students and analyzed the data qualitatively. Price did analyses on students' experience of foreign language anxiety,

classroom sources of anxiety, and the role of the instructor. She found out that stressful classroom experiences would lead to anxiety, and instructors had played a significant role in the amount of anxiety students had experienced. From the results, there were the cases of alleviating anxiety and increasing anxiety depending on the instructor's behaviors. Koch and Terrell (1991) used questionnaires in order to clarify students' perceptions of anxiety in the Natural Approach classroom. They found out that oral quizzes were the causes of anxiety, and being called on individually will make any student anxious who is not ready to speak. There was great variability in the responses, and none of the activities were perceived to be "comfortable" by all students even though Natural Approach was designed to decrease anxiety in the classroom. These studies indicate that the interaction between teacher and students plays a significant role in the amount of anxiety students' feel in the classroom.

One line of investigation of language anxiety lies in second language acquisition research. Language anxiety attracts attention in this field of study due to the possible effects on intake in L2 input. One such study is Sheen (2008), which investigated the effect of corrective feedback in relation to individual difference factors. This study is an investigation of the relationships among recasts (a kind of feedback), learner responses, and second language learning in a classroom context where the learners differed in the extent of their language anxiety. In that quasi-experimental classroom study, participants were classified into four groups: high anxiety learners with recasts; low anxiety learners with recasts; high anxiety learners without recasts; low anxiety learners without recasts. The target grammatical structure was articles. Recast

treatment was conducted for two weeks. The language anxiety questionnaire developed by Dornyei and MacIntyre (2006) was administered. Other testing instruments were a dictation test, writing test, and error correction test. These tests were administered twice as pre- and posttests. The study attempted to relate language anxiety to the process of second language acquisition. The study found that recasts were only effective for low-anxiety learners. An implication of this study was that, it is meaningful to consider how to lower students' anxiety and the kind of factors that influence students' anxiety.

Sheen (2008) focused on the effectiveness of teachers' feedback according to students' anxiety level which was presumed to be stable in that study. It would seem reasonable, however, to assume that anxiety levels fluctuate with the classroom interactions which include teachers' initiated questioning as well as feedback. In addition, the two studies of Price (1991) and Koch and Terrell (1991) demonstrate the necessity of considering students' language anxiety which comes from classroom interactions.

This study will examine language anxiety which arises from teachers' questioning and teachers' feedback. With that in mind, the study posed the following research questions:
1) What kind of questioning and feedback do teachers aim to provide for students?
2) What kind of teachers' questioning and feedback give rise to student's language anxiety?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 39 high school students learning English, in the second year of high school, age ranging from 16 to 17 years old (23 male and 16 female), and 6 high school English teachers(3 male and 3 female) from the same high school in Sapporo. In this high school, second year students take six English lessons per week: three English course II lessons and three Oral Communication lessons. Among the six English teachers, one teacher teaches Oral Communication lessons to this class. All the participants were native speakers of Japanese. The survey was carried out in October, 2012.

3.2 Materials

The study used an open-ended questionnaire. Questions were prepared for both students and teachers. The students were asked two questions: 1) What kind of teachers' question makes you feel anxious? and 2) What kind of teachers' feedback makes you feel anxious? The teachers were also asked two questions: 1) What kind of questioning and feedback do you aim to give your students? and 2) How do you conduct your questioning and feedback in class?

4. Results

The data were analyzed qualitatively using the method described in Tanaka (2012). Three researchers specialized in the relevant fields carried out the analysis. The received responses were divided into clusters and recorded on strips of paper. For the students, 38 responses for questioning, and 39 responses for feedback were extracted. For the teachers, there were 8 responses for the questioning, and 13 responses for the feedback.

These data were divided into several groups according to the contents of responses. After grouping these data, the relationships among the groups were considered.

First, the data for the anxiety arising from teachers' questioning were classified into four groups (Figure 1). There were many students who thought it was embarrassing to do something in front of everyone else. Also, students felt stressed when called on suddenly or when asked about something they did not know. As a result, most students felt that they needed more support from the teachers when answering a question.
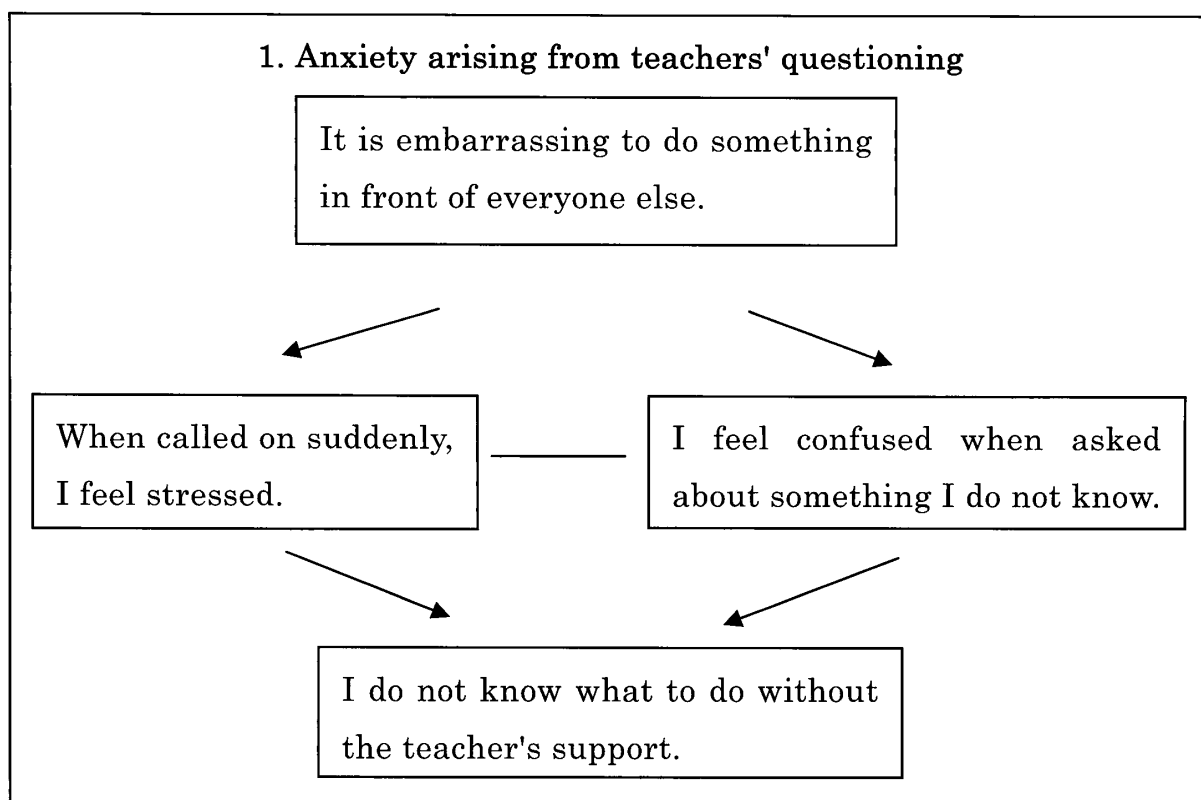

Figure 1. Students' answers related to anxiety arising from teachers' questioning. Signs in the charts indicate the following:
————— = relationship and ————▶ = direction of effect.

Second, the data for anxiety arising from teachers' feedback were also classified into four groups (Figure 2). Students worry about having their lack of knowledge pointed out, and they feel discouraged and anxious when their answers are disregarded by the teacher. In addition, they feel anxious when the teacher does not deal with the student mistakes in detail. When the teacher reacts emotionally, they become anxious because of the miscommunication with the teacher.
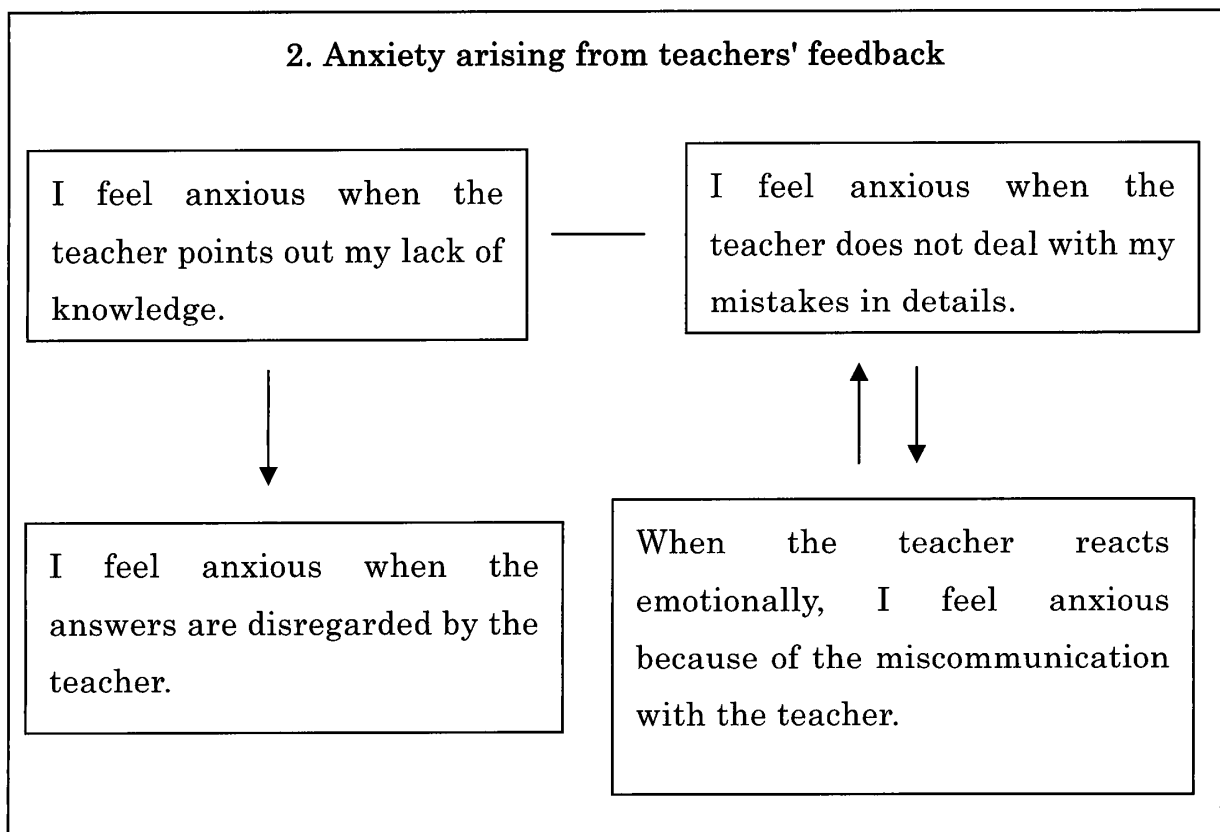
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2. Anxiety arising from teachers' feedback

I feel anxious when the teacher points out my lack of knowledge.	I feel anxious when the teacher does not deal with my mistakes in details.
I feel anxious when the answers are disregarded by the teacher.	When the teacher reacts emotionally, I feel anxious because of the miscommunication with the teacher.

Figure 2. Students' answers related to anxiety arising from teachers' feedback. Signs in the charts indicate the following:
_____ = relationship, ————▶ = direction of effect, and
══════▶ = directions of effects.

Third, the data of teachers' devices of questioning were classified into three groups (Figure 3). Teachers attempt to ask questions which avoid students' confusion and errors. They try to ask students questions based on only the already-learned items. They also ask students questions which call for practical skills in English.
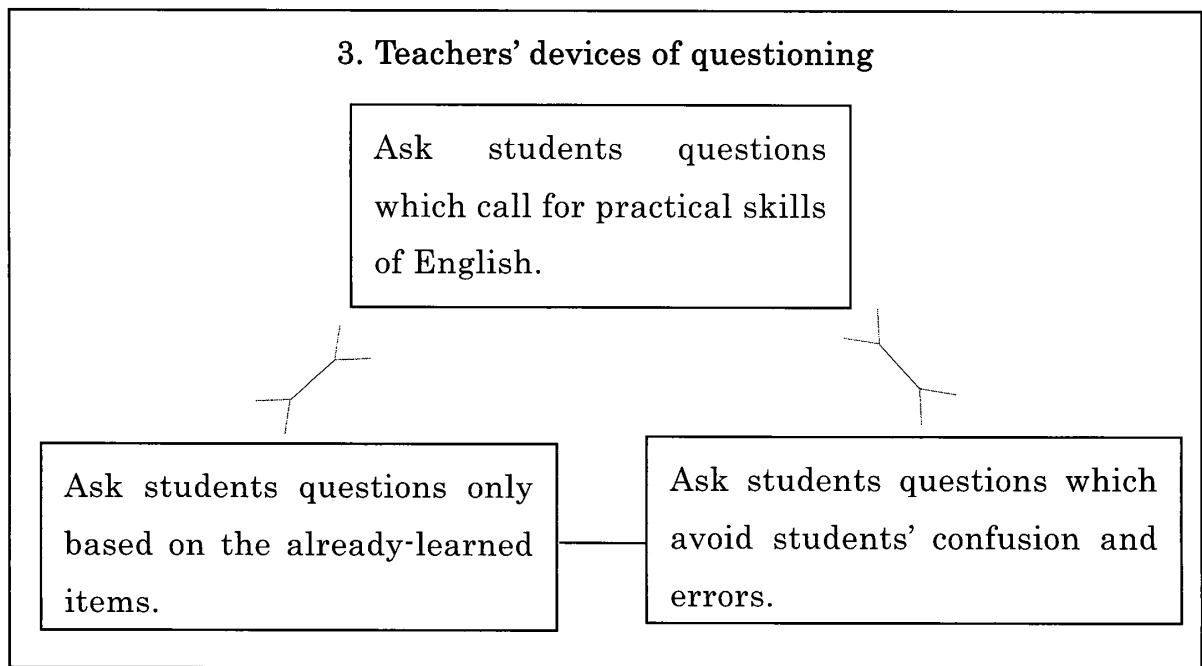

3. Teachers' devices of questioning

Ask students questions which call for practical skills of English.

Ask students questions only based on the already-learned items.

Ask students questions which avoid students' confusion and errors.

Figure 3. Teachers' devices related to questioning from teacher's answers. Signs in the charts indicate the following: —————— = relationship and >———< = opposition, antagonism.

Fourth, the data of the teachers' devices of feedback were classified into four groups (Figure 4). Teachers try to give feedback which promotes students' confidence by praising the students. Teachers give feedback which generates positive attitudes towards learning. Giving feedback to students by considering students' comprehension also seems to be a teacher aim. Teachers sometimes give feedback by taking classroom
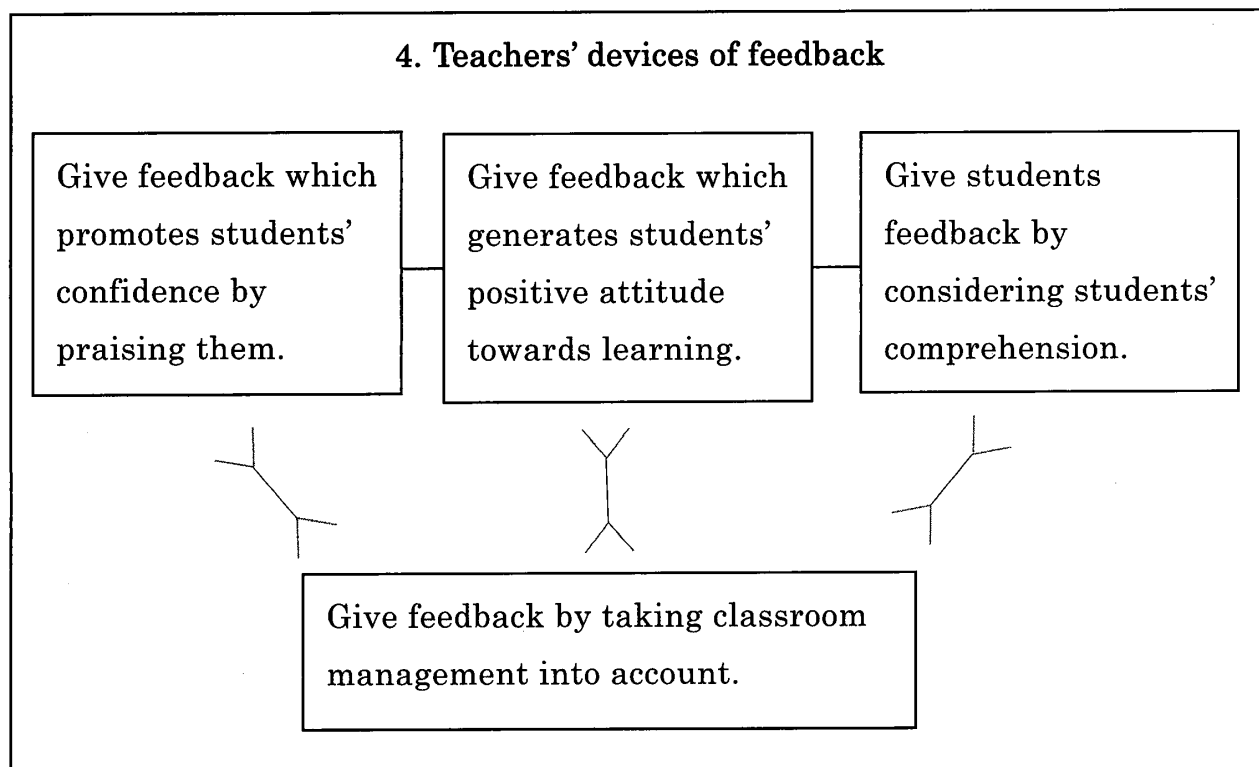
management into account.

| 4. Teachers' devices of feedback |

| Give feedback which promotes students' confidence by praising them. | Give feedback which generates students' positive attitude towards learning. | Give students feedback by considering students' comprehension. |

Give feedback by taking classroom management into account.

Figure 4. Teachers' devices involved in feedback from teacher's answers. Signs in the charts indicate the following: ———— = relationships and ⟩————⟨ = opposition, antagonism. Signs in all the four charts are based on Tanaka (2012) and translated by the author.

5. Discussion

The present study investigated the relationships among teachers' questioning, teachers' feedback, and students' language anxiety in the high school English classroom. Research question 1 was: "What kind of questioning and feedback do teachers aim to provide for students?" For questioning, teachers utilize question-asking strategies that teachers perceive to help avoid embarrassing students in class.

Some teachers also ask students challenging questions in order to foster students' English skills. In the feedback, teachers aim to give students feedback which promotes students' motivation and confidence. Teachers think it important to take the students' level of proficiency and comprehension into consideration when giving feedback. Research question 2 was "What kind of teachers' questioning and feedback give rise to students' language anxiety?" For questioning, despite the teachers' consideration, students feel that they need more support from teachers when questioned in class. Many students are uneasy about speaking in front of class when asked questions by the teacher. Students feel stressed when questioned suddenly. For feedback, students fear getting negative feedback from the teacher. Similarly, students fear being disparaged by the teacher. Moreover, when the teacher reacts emotionally, students feel stressed and confused.

The responses of teachers' and students' were in clear contrast. For example, one teacher answered, "I often consider which question to ask and of whom, depending on students' English abilities." Another teacher stated, "I always ask questions concerning already-learned items, because I want my students to experience satisfaction. I want my students to feel refreshment after overcoming difficult questions." Moreover, another teacher says, "Mostly, I praise my students. When students make mistakes, I tell them not to be ashamed of making mistakes." These teachers think it important to let students get over difficult tasks without feeling uneasiness.

For the students however, one states, "I feel nervous when I cannot get the meaning of the question the teacher is asking. I want the teacher to explain clearly so that I can easily

understand." Another student says, "I feel anxious when the teacher asks very difficult questions. I wish all of the questions to be yes-no questions." As for teachers' feedback, one student says, "Even if I had made a mistake, I don't want the teacher to correct my answer rudely. I sometimes feel shocked at the teacher's behavior."

The results show a gap between teachers' and students' perceptions of anxiety. Although teachers are trying to alleviate students' stress and anxiety in class, students feel that teachers are not doing enough of that. Among the student responses, some students stated they feel that questioning itself is anxiety provoking. Similarly, they think that teachers' corrective feedback itself always causes stress. These results indicate that it is very difficult to ease the feelings of stress of every student, even if teachers strive to reduce students' anxiety in class.

6. Conclusions

The present study concludes that even though teachers were trying to lower students' anxiety in class, many students still feel very anxious in the English classroom. Especially, being called on suddenly generates high anxiety, and students feel anxious to answer something not well understood. As for teachers' feedback, students care about the way the teacher corrects them, and when mistakes are rudely corrected they feel stress. What teachers should keep in mind is how to cope with students' embarrassment and stress in the English class; students may be much more sensitive than teachers appear to be aware of.

However, there are limitations in the present study. First, this study was based on qualitative analysis from open-ended

questionnaire, but further investigation from interviews or classroom observations could be possible. Second, from the answers of students as well as teachers, they contained some elements which cannot be considered as English language anxiety. Some of the students' answers would be applicable to other subjects; they are not unique to anxiety in the English class. It is however clear that the kind of student expressed anxiety here is present in English classes.

It is important to conduct research in different contexts with a variety of students to be able to generalize the findings of the current study. It would be meaningful to establish and elucidate students' anxiety from quantitative study as well as qualitative study. The detailed relationship between teachers' questioning and feedback and students' language anxiety will need to be further elucidated in further research.

Note

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