PERFECTIONISM AND ANXIETY IN JAPANESE EFL CLASSROOMS: A CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION

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Abstract

Perfectionism is a pervasive affective factor that influences Japanese learners' willingness to engage in spoken English, despite extensive exposure to English in university programs. Although foreign language anxiety (FLA) and willingness to communicate (WTC) have been widely examined, the specific role of perfectionism as a precursor to anxiety and communication avoidance remains underexplored in the Japanese EFL context. This conceptual paper addresses this gap by synthesizing theories of perfectionism, language anxiety, and WTC to propose the Perfectionism–Anxiety–Communication (PAC) model. The PAC model explains how socially prescribed perfectionistic standards, reinforced by Japan's accuracy-oriented instructional culture, trigger anxiety, erode self-efficacy, and suppress learners' oral participation. The model further highlights classroom-level and sociocultural amplifiers such as fear of negative evaluation, test-driven pedagogy, and face-saving norms that intensify the cycle of communication avoidance. By clarifying the mechanisms by which perfectionism shapes affective responses and communicative behavior, this study offers a theoretically grounded lens for understanding persistent silence and limited speaking performance among Japanese EFL learners. The paper concludes with pedagogical recommendations and research directions to create psychologically safe, confidence-building classrooms that normalize errors and promote communication over linguistic perfection.

Keywords: perfectionism, foreign language anxiety, Japanese EFL learners, willingness to communicate, communicative competence

1. INTRODUCTION

In the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Japanese learners encounter significant challenges, particularly in oral communication. Despite extensive exposure to English in academic settings, many advanced EFL students continue to hesitate in speaking situations due to intense pressure to maintain linguistic accuracy and a profound fear of making mistakes. The cultural backdrop in Japan emphasizes perfectionism, reinforced by educational expectations, social norms, and peer judgments, contributing to this anxiety-laden environment (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). This tendency towards perfectionism is linked to adverse outcomes such as heightened anxiety and diminished willingness to communicate (WTC) in the classroom, creating a cycle where anxiety exacerbates the reluctance to engage verbally in foreign language contexts (Shu, 2023; Yashima, 2002).

The notion that anxiety is a robust predictor of silence and avoidance in communication has been well-documented in educational settings, particularly in relation to Japanese EFL learners, where classroom dynamics can often heighten stress levels (Dewaele, 2019). Understanding the interplay between perfectionism and anxiety is crucial, given that existing studies have tackled these constructs independently yet have largely neglected their direct interrelations within the Japanese EFL context. This gap highlights a pressing need for research that synthesizes existing theories to elucidate how perfectionistic tendencies may generate anxiety, further suppressing oral performance (Weda et al., 2021; Lee & Lee, 2019).

This paper seeks to fill this research void by introducing a novel Perfectionism–Anxiety–Communication (PAC) conceptual model that accounts for these intersecting factors. By integrating theoretical insights with empirical findings, the model aims to articulate the dynamics through which perfectionism and anxiety collectively diminish participation and WTC. The development of this conceptual framework will not only enhance our understanding of these psychological constructs in the EFL context but also inform our understanding of these constructs in other contexts. However, it will also offer actionable pedagogical implications for instructors and curriculum designers, addressing the unique challenges faced by Japanese learners in developing their communicative competence (Movafaghardestani et al., 2024; Ardestani et al., 2025).

In conclusion, this paper contributes to the field of applied linguistics by providing a comprehensive model that captures the complex relationship between perfectionism and anxiety, emphasizing the need for educational strategies

that foster a supportive environment conducive to effective language learning and communication. This paper is not intended to collect or analyze data; instead, it synthesizes existing research to propose the Perfectionism–Anxiety–Communication (PAC) model for Japanese EFL contexts.

2. BACKGROUND & THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Perfectionism in East Asian Educational Cultures

In East Asian educational settings, particularly in Japan, cultural expectations exert profound influences on students' academic pursuits, where the drive for excellence is a deeply entrenched social value. This cultural milieu creates an environment in which high academic achievement is not merely encouraged but expected, fostering competitive dynamics among peers. The pressure to excel often translates into a pronounced fear of failure, further intensifying anxiety about academic performance. Students are acutely aware that their worth is frequently measured against their academic successes and failures, leading to a pervasive fear of making mistakes that could jeopardize their social standing (Pishghadam & Akhondpoor, 2011; Flett et al., 2016). Such fears reflect a broader cultural and educational context that values conformity and high achievement, fostering maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies among learners (Yang et al., 2021; DiBartolo et al., 2007).

Perfectionism in this context is often reinforced by shame-based motivations and social comparisons, in which individuals measure their worth against their peers' achievements. This ongoing process of comparison not only heightens the stakes associated with academic performance but also cultivates a shame-driven environment where mistakes are stigmatized (Stoeber et al., 2013). Such emphases on image and performance align with the conceptual frameworks proposed by Hewitt and Flett, who delineate perfectionism into three dimensions: self-oriented perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism, and other-oriented perfectionism. In East Asian societies, such as Japan, students typically exhibit higher levels of socially prescribed perfectionism, reflecting the cultural imperative to meet external standards set by society, parents, and peers (Yang et al., 2021; DiBartolo et al., 2007). This societal pressure leads to an increased sense of anxiety, as individuals fear negative evaluations from others about their performance, resulting in a cycle of self-criticism and avoidance behaviors (Flett et al., 2016; DiBartolo et al., 2007). Moreover, the roles of face-saving and peer judgment are paramount in shaping students' behavior and academic experiences. In educational settings, maintaining face, a construct encompassing social reputation and peer respect, is intertwined with expectations to perform flawlessly (Yang et al., 2021; Flett et al., 2016). Consequently, students often refrain from participating in class discussions or expressing themselves in English, fearing the repercussions of making errors. This dynamic complicates their willingness to communicate, particularly in a language as contextually rich and grammatically unique as English, where the stakes feel notably higher due to their perceived inadequacy (Pishghadam & Akhondpoor, 2011; Flett et al., 2016).

The implications of perfectionistic self-presentation are particularly pronounced among language learners, where maintaining an image of competence can inhibit language acquisition and fluency. As learners navigate their educational journeys within the framework of perfectionism, their English-speaking behaviors often reflect this internalized pressure. The concurrent anxiety stemming from their perfectionism can lead to avoidance of practice opportunities, thereby stunting their overall language development (Flett et al., 2016; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). In Japanese universities, this tendency is notably pronounced, as students grapple with the dual demands of academic excellence and the inherent challenges of mastering a foreign language.

Through the lens of perfectionism, it becomes evident that these cultural dynamics not only shape individual learning experiences but also foster a broader environment that can inhibit effective language communication. To address these issues, it is crucial to understand the intricate relationships between perfectionism, anxiety, and communication behaviors within East Asian contexts, particularly as they relate to English language learning in Japan.

2.2 Language Anxiety in EFL Contexts

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a prevalent phenomenon influencing learners in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) settings. It has been extensively conceptualized and measured by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, particularly through the development of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The FLCAS is designed to assess various dimensions of anxiety specific to language learning and has become a foundational tool in language acquisition research (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Chen & Chang, 2004). This scale addresses three primary types of anxiety relevant to language learning: communication anxiety, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Chen & Chang, 2004; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Communication anxiety refers to apprehension associated with speaking or interacting in the target language, while test anxiety encompasses concerns linked to performance evaluation in assessments. Fear of negative evaluation involves anxiety about potential judgments from teachers or peers regarding one's language skills, which influences students' confidence and willingness to engage in classroom activities (Chen & Chang, 2004; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

MacIntyre and Gardner's affective–cognitive model further elucidates the relationship between anxiety and language performance. This model posits that anxiety leads not only to emotional responses but also to cognitive repercussions that can impede language acquisition and usage. Specifically, anxiety can inhibit cognitive processing, leading learners

to have difficulty focusing and retrieving language from memory when required, thereby affecting their speaking performance (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Chen & Chang, 2004). Moreover, research has indicated that anxiety can reduce working memory capacity, which is crucial for real-time language processing during speaking tasks. When learners experience heightened anxiety, their working memory can become burdened by worries and apprehensive thoughts, resulting in reduced processing capacity and hampered speech production (Booth et al., 2017; LoTemplio et al., 2023). Studies have shown that individuals under anxiety are more likely to struggle with language production due to these memory constraints, which can manifest as hesitancies or a complete communication breakdown (Booth et al., 2017; LoTemplio et al., 2023).

Particular attention has been paid to the experience of speaking anxiety and classroom silence among Japanese EFL students. Research indicates that fear of making mistakes and facing negative evaluations from peers and instructors represents a significant barrier to participation in classroom discourse. This cultural context may amplify feelings of inadequacy. Studies have noted that the silence often observed in Japanese classrooms can be correlated with these anxiety factors (Castro & Díaz, 2014; Liu, 2023). The convergence of social expectations and educational culture in Japan creates an environment in which the stakes of participation are perceived as exceedingly high, prompting students to adopt silence as a coping mechanism against perceived judgment (Castro & Díaz, 2014; Liu, 2023; Liu & Jackson, 2008).

Furthermore, perfectionistic tendencies can exacerbate levels of foreign language anxiety, particularly in EFL settings. The pressure to perform flawlessly may lead to heightened error sensitivity, in which students become overly cautious and self-critical, resulting in increased speaking anxiety (MacIntyre & Noels, 1996; M & Zachariah, 2025). As perfectionist learners approach language tasks, the weight of their expectations often paralyzes their ability to communicate effectively; the fear of being judged similarly hinders their willingness to engage (Castro & Díaz, 2014; Frei & Giroud, 2024). This interplay between perfectionism and anxiety reinforces the challenges faced by language learners, particularly in high-stakes environments such as Japanese universities, where a strong emphasis on achieving academic excellence prevails (Frei & Giroud, 2024).

In summary, understanding the dynamics of foreign language anxiety in EFL contexts is crucial for developing pedagogical strategies that address these challenges. By recognizing the implications of anxiety on cognitive processing and speaking performance, educators can adopt more supportive and inclusive teaching methods that alleviate the pressures associated with language learning. Additionally, linking anxiety with perfectionistic traits can provide insights into fostering environments where students feel more secure and confident, ultimately enhancing their language-related experiences.

2.3 Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in Japan

The concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) contexts, particularly in Japan, is anchored in Yashima's framework, which incorporates the notion of "international posture." This posture represents learners' attitudes towards intercultural engagement and their openness to using English as a communication tool beyond linguistic proficiency (Yashima, 2002). Yashima's model suggests that an international posture significantly enhances WTC, as students who are highly open to different cultures are more likely to initiate communication in English. This is particularly significant in the Japanese EFL context, where cultural norms often emphasize modesty and restraint, leading to a tendency towards silence and minimal verbal participation in learning environments (Yashima, 2002).

Cultural expectations in Japan contribute heavily to the behaviors observed in EFL classrooms, where students frequently exhibit non-volunteering tendencies. The norms surrounding collectivism and face-saving incentivize students to avoid taking risks when speaking, out of fear of embarrassment and the potential for negative peer evaluation (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000). As a result, the interplay between cultural norms and individual psychology creates an atmosphere where students are notably hesitant to engage verbally, thereby diminishing their overall WTC (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000). This avoidance is compounded by the effects of perfectionism and anxiety, both of which frequently plague English learners in Japan. High perfectionistic standards lead to an intense fear of making mistakes, which, coupled with anxiety, forms a significant barrier to WTC (Lee & Lee, 2019).

Recent research, including Munezane's (2013) study, further illustrates the complex relationship between WTC and affective variables such as anxiety and perfectionism. Munezane found that these affective factors serve not only as barriers to communication but also as mediators in the relationship between learners' emotional states and speaking behavior (Munezane, 2013). For instance, students who experience high anxiety levels and perfectionistic tendencies often report lower WTC, leading to a reluctance to initiate conversations in English. This reluctance directly affects their speaking performance, reinforcing a cycle of avoidance that impedes their language acquisition (Lee & Lee, 2019).

Thus, there is an urgent need for a refined framework that integrates these constructs to understand better and support Japanese EFL learners' WTC. Current models inadequately address the nuanced interactions between cultural influences, emotional states, and communication readiness in this specific context. Future pedagogical strategies must prioritize boosting WTC by addressing these intertwined issues, creating environments that encourage risk-taking and

open communication (Yashima, 2002; Lee & Lee, 2019). The development of such frameworks could pave the way for enhanced language proficiency and greater confidence in communication among Japanese EFL learners.

3. Interaction Between Perfectionism and Anxiety
3.1 Direct Pathway: Perfectionism → Anxiety

Perfectionism is a significant precursor to Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) in English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) contexts, particularly in speaking situations. The construct of perfectionism can instigate anxiety through various cognitive mechanisms that directly impact learners' experiences in the language classroom. For instance, perfectionists often engage in excessive self-monitoring, constantly evaluating their performance against idealized standards they have set for themselves or those anticipated by their peers and instructors (Tsang, 2022). This overwhelming pressure can lead to a pervasive fear of making errors, especially in oral communication contexts where immediate responses are expected. Such apprehension can lead to cognitive overload, making it difficult for learners to access their language skills effectively when communication opportunities arise.

The cognitive mechanisms involved include speech freezing, in which learners become immobilized by anxiety at the prospect of speaking (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). The fear of errors can manifest in significant hesitation before and during speaking activities, leading to the avoidance of verbal participation altogether. Perfectionistic self-evaluation, in which individuals equate their language proficiency with their self-worth, leads to a heightened fear of negative judgments from others. Research shows that students with perfectionistic tendencies are more likely to perceive the classroom environment as an evaluative context, which intensifies their anxiety during speaking activities (Cheng et al., 1999). Consequently, this interplay between perfectionism and anxiety creates a cyclical pattern, where anxiety induced by perfectionism hampers effective communication and contributes to a culture of silence among learners.

3.2 Indirect Pathway: Perfectionism → Low Confidence → Anxiety

In addition to the direct influence of perfectionism on anxiety, there exists an indirect pathway whereby perfectionism erodes learners' self-efficacy and perceived communicative competence, ultimately leading to increased anxiety. Perfectionistic students often experience diminished self-efficacy due to the unrealistic expectations they place on themselves, and their focus on absolute accuracy detracts from their ability to feel competent when communicating in English (Höl & KASIMİ, 2022). Consequently, this low perceived competence suppresses their willingness to take risks and engage spontaneously in conversation, critical aspects of language learning.

Moreover, the anticipatory nature of anxiety in these contexts cannot be overlooked. Learners frequently experience anxiety even before they are required to speak, a phenomenon characterized as anticipatory anxiety. This self-doubt is compounded by rumination over past performances and perfectionistic self-comparison, in which learners measure themselves against peers and perceived standards of excellence (Lileikienė & Danilevičienė, 2016). Such cognitive patterns can further solidify anxieties about speaking as they become increasingly fixated on the possibility of negative evaluation. Thus, the combination of low confidence and heightened anxiety ultimately culminates in an environment where students are less likely to engage verbally, negatively impacting their language acquisition and fluency (Mukminin et al., 2015).

3.3 Classroom-Level Amplifiers

The interaction between perfectionism and anxiety is exacerbated by various institutional and pedagogical norms prevalent in Japanese educational settings. Educators' expectations for correctness often amplify these psychological constructs, creating an atmosphere in which students feel pressured to deliver "perfect" answers during classroom interactions. Such expectations align with broader cultural values that prize accuracy and appropriate responses, further heightening students' anxiety when engaging in language tasks (Tsang, 2022; Cheng et al., 1999). In these contexts, peer evaluations of pronunciation and grammar can lead to social comparisons that reinforce students' perfectionistic tendencies, making them more self-critical and less likely to speak up.

Moreover, the limited opportunities for free speaking in many Japanese classrooms hinder students' ability to practice their language skills in a low-stress environment. The focus on test-oriented practices, in which performance is often gauged by standardized examinations, reinforces a perfectionist orientation among learners, who feel their language abilities are continually under scrutiny (Tsang, 2022; Cheng et al., 1999). Consequently, this reliance on a rigid assessment framework discourages risk-taking behaviors necessary for developing fluency. As students internalize these pressures, they may operate within a cyclical model of perfectionism and silence, further isolating themselves from opportunities to communicate in their language studies.

3.4 Sociocultural Influences

Underpinning the educational challenges are several sociocultural constructs in Japan that reinforce and perpetuate perfectionistic beliefs among EFL learners. The concepts of honne (one's true feelings) and tatemae (the facade one presents in public) elucidate how societal pressures foster a fear of standing out and promote avoidance behaviors, such as silence, in classroom settings. This dynamic leads to a culture where expressions of individuality, particularly in language use, may be viewed unfavorably, further entrenching perfectionistic mentalities based on conformity and group harmony, or wa (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Additionally, the prevalence of shame-based motivation creates a persistent fear of embarrassment regarding language proficiency. This cultural expectation of avoiding failure at all costs not only sustains student anxiety but also encourages the avoidance of making mistakes (Chen, 2023). The norms surrounding error avoidance, which are integral to maintaining social harmony, compound learners' underlying anxiety and ultimately discourage oral communication. These cultural expectations function as a backdrop to the academic pressures students face, interlinking cultural identity, language acquisition, and psychological well-being (Sanaei, 2016).

In conclusion, the interaction between perfectionism and anxiety in Japanese EFL classrooms manifests through direct and indirect pathways that are exacerbated by classroom norms and sociocultural influences. Understanding this interplay is vital, as it highlights the compelling need for a conceptual framework, specifically the Perfectionism–Anxiety–Communication (PAC) model, that elucidates these dynamics and proposes pedagogical strategies aimed at improving learners' communication experiences. By addressing the individual and cultural factors that contribute to perfectionism and anxiety in language learning, educators can foster environments that foster greater linguistic confidence and participation.

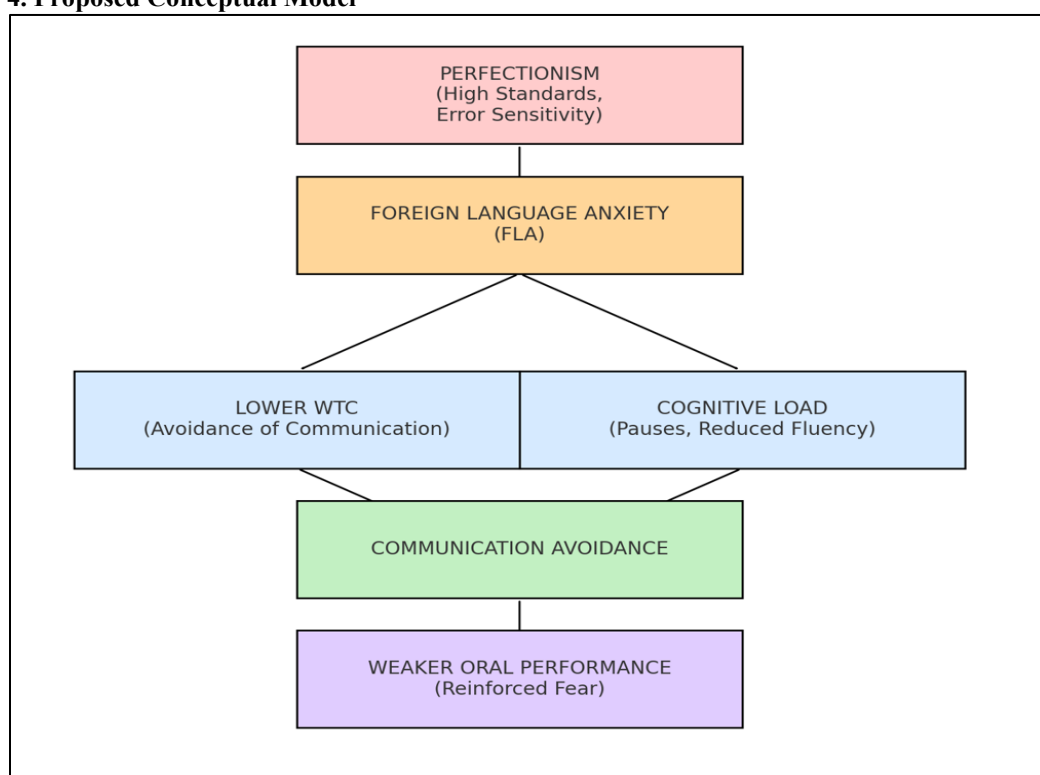## 4. Proposed Conceptual Model

Figure 1. Perfectionism–Anxiety–Communication (PAC) Model

In the context of Japanese English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) classrooms, the Perfectionism–Anxiety–Communication (PAC) model (figure 1) provides a robust framework for understanding the interplay between perfectionistic tendencies and Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which can compromise communication abilities. Rooted in key theories from perfectionism research (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 2002), language anxiety studies (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), the affective–cognitive processing model (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) theory (Yashima, 2002), this model elucidates the mechanisms through which perfectionism engenders anxiety and subsequently diminishes communicative efficiency in learners.

One of the primary characteristics of perfectionism in EFL contexts is the relentless pursuit of error-free output, which is often reinforced by teacher expectations and classroom practices. In Japanese educational environments, the emphasis on correct grammar and pronunciation in student responses becomes a driving force behind learners' perfectionistic scripts. These scripts manifest through excessive self-monitoring and the internalization of high personal standards, leading to heightened fear of making errors. This fear triggers physiological stress responses, generating cognitive overload that impairs students' ability to process and produce language effectively. Such perfectionistic demands extend beyond internal narratives; they intertwine with external pressures from institutional expectations, where students often feel compelled to deliver "perfect answers" in class.

Consequently, the cognitive ramifications of anxiety linked to perfectionism lead to speech freezing, prolonged hesitations, and communication avoidance. This detrimental cycle is intricately connected to affective responses,

worry, fear, and embarrassment, which further exacerbate anxiety levels and erode the learners' Willingness to Communicate (WTC). The fear of negative judgment, a core component identified by Horwitz et al. (1986), amplifies the emotional toll that perfectionism exacts on learners. As anxiety escalates, students struggle with anticipating potential negative evaluations, thus creating a vicious cycle where anxiety diminishes their actual communicative performance and self-efficacy.

In addition to the direct link between perfectionism and anxiety, the PAC model articulates an indirect route in which perfectionism leads to diminished self-efficacy and perceived communicative competence. When learners internalize perfectionistic standards, their confidence in their ability to effectively communicate in English declines. According to the affective-cognitive processing model proposed by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), reduced self-efficacy suppresses risk-taking behavior, which is crucial for spontaneous engagement in conversations, thereby heightening anticipatory anxiety even before speaking opportunities arise. Learners' sense of self-doubt, rooted in rumination over previous performance and unfavorable comparison with peers, creates a formidable barrier to engaging verbally in EFL settings. This self-constricting pattern manifests as avoidance behaviors, ultimately weakening oral fluency and further reinforcing existing perfectionistic fears.

Classroom-level amplifiers inadvertently exacerbate these psychological pathways. Institutional norms, including a focus on correctness and test-oriented practices, contrive an educational framework that often prioritizes perfectionistic outcomes over communicative competence. For example, teacher-controlled questioning patterns predominantly evaluate individual responses for accuracy, thereby sidestepping opportunities for spontaneous speaking and peer collaboration. The external pressure of peer evaluation, particularly regarding grammar and pronunciation, intensifies students' fears about their output. The limited opportunities for free speaking exacerbate anxiety, forcing learners into a state of silence, a phenomenon highlighted by Yashima (2002), who noted that cultural context directly influences WTC levels and communicative behavior among Japanese learners.

The PAC model integrates these elements to delineate a transparent causal chain: perfectionism leads to anxiety, which in turn diminishes WTC, creating cognitive interference that precipitates communication avoidance. This pathway not only highlights the profound implications of perfectionism for learners' EFL experiences but also underscores the need for supportive pedagogical strategies that acknowledge affective barriers. Teaching practices that foster an environment of experimentation, normalize mistakes, and prioritize communicative functionality over strict accuracy may facilitate a paradigm shift in how students perceive language learning.

In conclusion, the PAC model provides a conceptual foundation for future empirical work and pedagogical strategies targeting the affective barriers inherent in Japan's EFL environment. By addressing both perfectionistic pressures and the anxiety they provoke, educators can foster greater WTC, thereby enhancing overall language acquisition. As the interplay of affective, cognitive, and sociocultural factors increasingly shapes students' personalities and performances, understanding and addressing these dimensions will be crucial for developing effective EFL curricula that promote not only linguistic proficiency but also psychological resilience in learners.

5. Comparative Insights: Korea, China, and Taiwan

In South Korea, the prevalent examination culture significantly fuels perfectionistic tendencies and anxiety amongst learners in English-speaking contexts. The substantial pressure exerted by high parental expectations and an achievement-oriented schooling approach compels students to prioritize flawless language performance (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). The educational landscape is primarily characterized by a test-driven pedagogical framework that valorizes accuracy and punishes errors, cultivating environments where mistakes are viewed as failures rather than growth opportunities. Consequently, this relentless pursuit of perfection leads to heightened anxiety, substantially impairing learners' willingness to engage spontaneously in English conversations. Similar to their Japanese counterparts, South Korean students grapple with the specter of error-induced shame, leading to pronounced classroom silence, limited participation, and stunted oral proficiency (Jin, 2023). The comparative pressure for correctness, coupled with an entrenched culture of silence, delineates a shared experience between Japan and Korea, where both contexts prioritize performance metrics over communicative fluidity.

China's exam-oriented education system also ingrains perfectionism deeply in English learning paradigms. Within this framework, an emphasis on memorization and grammatical precision perpetuates a culture of fear surrounding teacher evaluation, which often leads to elevated anxiety levels among students (Shirvan et al., 2019). The high stakes associated with performance on standardized tests further exacerbate foreign language anxiety, particularly in speaking contexts, thereby discouraging participation. Students are often paralyzed by fear of making mistakes, which limits their oral participation. The cultural focus on achieving high standards of correctness leaves little room for the spontaneity required in conversational practices, mirroring the anxiety experienced by Japanese learners (Wang, 2023). Therefore, both countries exhibit a concerning trend in which perfectionistic pressures hinder learners' willingness to communicate effectively.

In contrast, Taiwan has recently shifted from an accuracy-focused English instruction model toward a more communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. This pedagogical transformation aims to alleviate perfectionistic pressures and foster environments conducive to authentic communication (Movafaghardestani et al., 2024). By prioritizing interpersonal interaction and fluency over strict adherence to grammatical norms, Taiwanese educators

have reported more positive outcomes regarding students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English (Alqarni, 2021). This evolution stands in stark contrast to Japan's slower adaptation to communicative pedagogy, where traditional methods still dominate. In Taiwan, the move away from an anxiety-laden focus on error-free communication has facilitated greater language use in real-world contexts, leading to increased classroom participation and a reduction in the sort of perfectionistic anxieties that historically characterize both Japan and South Korea (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Overall, while South Korea, China, and Japan share cultural dispositions towards perfectionism in their educational systems, each context exhibits unique manifestations of this trait in EFL settings. South Korea and Japan largely retain traditions that inhibit linguistic expression, driven by fear of mistakes and strict performance standards, phenomena rooted in their collective cultures of silence and conformity. In contrast, Taiwan's shift toward a communicative approach offers a beacon of hope, moving away from perfectionism towards fostering greater communicative competence among learners. This comparative analysis underscores that, while perfectionism remains a salient factor across East Asian EFL contexts, the approaches to mitigating its adverse effects vary significantly, with Japan uniquely entrenched in silence due to its cultural values.

6. Pedagogical Recommendations

To effectively address the intertwined issues of perfectionism and language anxiety within Japanese EFL contexts, educators must cultivate an environment that prioritizes communication over accuracy. One fundamental strategy is to reduce the pressure associated with achieving linguistic perfection during speaking tasks. By introducing low-stakes oral activities, such as group discussions or informal presentations, educators can mitigate performance anxiety and provide students the space to experiment with language without the fear of immediate judgment. Such an approach aligns with the need to encourage "imperfect practice," in which learners focus on participation and expression rather than striving for native-like accuracy. The promotion of a growth mindset, viewing errors as developmental rather than failures, can further normalize mistakes as integral components of communicative language use. This conceptual reframing diminishes the stigma associated with errors, transforming them from points of embarrassment into valuable learning opportunities that foster language acquisition and increase willingness to communicate (WTC), Zhang (2019). Feedback mechanisms also play a vital role in shaping students' perceptions of their communicative abilities. Instead of public corrections that can evoke fear and anxiety, teachers should consider providing private, formative feedback that focuses on the constructive aspects of student performance. This approach allows learners to receive nuanced insights into their language use without the fear of public scrutiny, ultimately reducing anxiety and enhancing self-efficacy. Enhancing peer interaction through pair and small-group discussions can foster a supportive atmosphere where students can practice their speaking skills while benefiting from their peers' encouragement. By scaffolding speaking tasks that progressively build learners' confidence, educators can facilitate the gradual internalization of language use, steering students toward increasingly complex communicative scenarios at their own pace. Ultimately, while accuracy may still hold significance, the focus should shift to the effectiveness of communication rather than strict grammatical perfection (Shaalan, 2023).

Implementing these strategies can directly weaken the Perfectionism–Anxiety–Communication (PAC) cycle proposed in the model. By altering teacher behaviors, classroom interaction patterns, and assessment cultures, educators can cultivate a psychologically safe learning environment that encourages oral participation. As learners begin to experience language learning as an interactive and gradual process, rather than one dictated by the relentless pursuit of perfection, they will likely demonstrate increased WTC. Such a transformational approach holds great promise not only for mitigating the anxiety associated with perfectionism but also for enhancing overall communicative competence among Japanese EFL learners. By prioritizing effective communication and normalizing language as a dynamic, evolving skill, the educational landscape can be reshaped to foster confidence in language use, enabling students to flourish in their pursuit of English fluency (Hu et al., 2021).

In conclusion, fostering an environment that emphasizes communication over perfection aligns with broader educational goals and theoretical frameworks, such as the PAC model. Recognizing that perfectionism and anxiety are deeply rooted in societal and cultural constructs, these pedagogical shifts could provide a pathway toward a more engaging and less anxiety-ridden learning experience. Emphasizing these strategies thus paves the way not only for fostering oral fluency but also for revitalizing the classroom experience for learners in Japan's complex EFL landscape. As such, the adoption of these recommendations signifies not only a necessary shift in pedagogical tactics but also a commitment to enhancing the overall educational experience and well-being of learners (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Hewitt et al., 1996), orientation toward collectivism, and the resultant fear of standing out.

7. Future Research Directions

Longitudinal Studies on Perfectionism and Anxiety: Future research should examine how perfectionism and language anxiety co-develop over time among Japanese EFL learners. Longitudinal studies could illuminate the dynamic interactions between these constructs, shedding light on how early perfectionistic tendencies influence anxiety levels throughout the language learning process. Such research could further identify critical periods during which

interventions may be most effective and contribute to a greater understanding of the long-term implications of perfectionism on communicative competence and overall academic performance (Flett et al., 2016).

Experimental Interventions to Reduce Perfectionistic Pressure: Implementing interventions to reduce perfectionistic pressure during speaking tasks is an essential avenue for future investigation. By creating conditions that prioritize communication over grammatical accuracy, such as low stakes speaking opportunities, researchers can assess the effectiveness of these strategies in alleviating anxiety and enhancing learners' willingness to communicate. Evaluating the changes in students' performance and psychological states before and after these interventions would provide valuable insights into effective pedagogical practices (Aziz et al., 2023).

Psychologically Safe Classrooms Impacting WTC: Investigating the effect of psychologically safe classrooms on learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) is another crucial research direction. Studies should focus on how creating environments that normalize errors and encourage open communication can influence language anxiety and enhance WTC. This line of inquiry would help delineate specific teaching practices and classroom dynamics that foster a supportive atmosphere, thereby enabling students to participate more freely in English conversations without the fear of negative evaluation (Park et al., 2009).

AI-Based Tools as Anxiety-Reduction Mechanisms: Further exploration into the use of AI-based tools, such as chatbots or pronunciation applications, as potential mechanisms for reducing language anxiety are necessary. Research could evaluate how interaction with technological tools affects learners' confidence and reduces the fear of making mistakes in a non-judgmental setting. Such studies could help educators identify adequate resources that can complement traditional language instruction and provide alternative avenues for practice in speaking and comprehension (Pishghadam & Akhondpoor, 2011).

Cross-Cultural Comparisons with China, Korea, and Taiwan: Finally, conducting cross-cultural studies comparing Japan with China, Korea, and Taiwan may enrich the understanding of perfectionism and anxiety within East Asian EFL contexts. By examining the similarities and differences in how these countries approach language learning and the cultural underpinnings of perfectionism, researchers can provide critical insights into how cultural contexts shape students' experiences of anxiety and their willingness to communicate. Such comparative studies can reveal best practices and inform policy adjustments across different educational systems (Liu & Jackson, 2008).

These research directions will not only enrich the existing literature but also lay a solid foundation for developing targeted strategies to alleviate both perfectionism and language anxiety among Japanese EFL learners, ultimately fostering a more conducive environment for language acquisition.

8. CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper demonstrates that perfectionism serves as a central affective barrier to oral communication in Japanese EFL contexts. While Japan's English education system emphasizes accuracy, high performance standards, and error-free output, these expectations inadvertently cultivate foreign language anxiety and suppress learners' willingness to communicate. Integrating insights from perfectionism theory, the affective–cognitive model of language anxiety, and WTC research, the Perfectionism–Anxiety–Communication (PAC) framework clarifies how perfectionistic beliefs trigger anxiety, increase cognitive load, and ultimately lead to communication avoidance and weaker oral performance. This dynamic reinforces itself: silence reduces practice opportunities, diminished fluency confirms fears, and the cycle continues. The findings suggest that addressing affective variables, rather than merely linguistic competence, is essential to improving oral participation among Japanese learners. Future research and pedagogy must, therefore, shift toward environments that normalize mistakes, promote risk-taking, and build communicative confidence, enabling learners to engage in English without the debilitating pressure of perfection.

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