Three students from my seminar are hanging around after the end of the first day of a new class. I can tell they want to ask me something, but it is not some simple practicality or minor information, or they would have just asked. They have that special hesitant ‘should I ask?’ look on their faces. I slow my exit, wait for a few more students to trickle out, wipe off the chalkboard and then I look in their direction. They talk together, check their keitais and look up again to see if I am open to a question. I can guess what they will say.

After a moment of nervous hesitation, the three of them come sidling up to the front. “Yeeessss?” I say, letting the word draw itself out in a funny way. “Sensei, did you see how many exchange students are in the class?” They are worried about talking with the foreign exchange students in the class. “Oh,” I say in a joking voice, “I didn’t notice. You mean they weren’t Japanese?” They moan at my stupid comic tone and whine, “What are we going to do?” “What do you mean?” I ask, though I know what they mean. I just want them to say it. “We can’t talk as well as they can. We have to give a presentation in this class! In English!”

“Can I remind you that this class is Intercultural Communication? You’re supposed to have non-Japanese here or it’s not ‘inter’, right?” They shake their heads. “You’ll do fine,” I tell them. “This is a great chance to learn!” I give them more encouragement and several practical tips for discussions, but their self-worry keeps them from really listening. As we turn off the lights and move out to the hallway, I add, “And do not drop the class just because you’re nervous, OK?” They reluctantly nod their heads OK, and slowly walk off to lunch.

The Indian philosopher Vasubandhu all the way back in the 5th century identified the five universal human fears as:

1. Fear of death
2. Fear of loss of income
3. Fear of loss of reputation
4. Fear of loss of consciousness
5. Fear of speaking in front of people.

For most people, in most times and places, the fear of speaking in front of people is high on the list of life fears. For Japanese students, though, it seems at times as if the fear of speaking in
Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself

Written by Michael Pronko

front of people is even worse than all the others combined. Few students will risk death or lose income from speaking publicly, but I once did have a student faint during a presentation! I let her give the presentation to me later in my office and she did great! It was just the nervousness over a possible loss of face in front of other students, which she had worried about all night without sleeping, that made her faint.

It is easy to try to wish away students' fears about speaking, but they are a central issue in learning English. When I say, “Don't worry!” they only seem to worry more. However, only those students who conquer their fears ever attain higher levels. It is the largest hurdle that most students face, made larger by accumulated pressures from parents, teachers, other students and their own desire to do better. For many students, their studies are determined by their fears, not by their true abilities. Those three students waiting after class did not ask about the content of the course, after all, they were worrying about speaking in front of the foreign students.

Their worry is understandable but not excusable. Students from other countries have a much more casual attitude towards speaking out than Japanese students, regardless of their actual English level. Japanese students become strangled by their worries. Every country has shy students or ones who simply never speak out, of course, and there are many strong-minded, brave students in Japan, too. However, the percentage of fearful students is higher in Japan than anywhere else in the world. Compared to the students I have taught in China and students I taught in America from all over the world, Japanese students seem to come from some isolated island of speaking fear!

This fear of speaking English has many different roots and causes and is different for every person. When I go out in Tokyo, even my foreign face can trigger the fear. A waitress showing me to my seat at an expensive jazz club recently said, “Oh, I’m relieved you speak Japanese. I didn’t know what to do if I had to speak English.” This was a place with a lot of foreign customers, so I asked her, “You mean, you don’t know any English at all, or you are just nervous to speak?” “Both,” she answered, blushing and hurrying away before I could even order a beer.

This happens all the time, so often that at most restaurants, I quickly say something in Japanese to put the people at ease. Sadly, that waitress lost a good chance to practice whatever English she did know. And, I almost always say, “Oh, you're English is excellent,” because people soak up any compliment on their English with great zeal. They are desperate for any sort of positive comment. Avoiding speaking makes the fear worse because every opportunity to get over it is entirely avoided. The fear then grows deeper and starts to seem justified. It may be irrational, but it is powerful. This fear needs its own descriptive term, maybe
“eigo-phobia” or 不會話心 (no-talk heart)?

Whatever causes the fear of speaking English, though, the fear, like most fears, can be unlearned. People can learn new responses when they choose to do so, given the right situation and motivation. Strangely, though, the classroom should be the place to do that. Classrooms should be places of comfort where all kinds of ideas and skills can be tried out without fear. Unfortunately, though, English classrooms in Japan are often places to learn anxiety from constant testing, frustration and ever-looming failure. Sometimes it seems that students have learned more fear than language in their English classes. The one lesson they have not learned is confidence.

President Franklin Roosevelt once that, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself!" The same thing goes for English. Thinking of that, maybe my students were right after all to talk about their anxiety about speaking. They were serious students with a fairly high level of English. The only thing they did have to worry about was their worrying! Fear was indeed their only fear. And yet, they finally got over it in the classes that followed. Little by little, they started to join the English discussion about intercultural communication topics with the other less-inhibited foreign students. When they did that, they could start to learn about what they did not yet know, rather than worry about what they feared they could not do.