

Learners' Self-perception of English Ability: Its relationships with English language anxiety and strength of motivation for learning the language

Ayumi Takahashi

1 Introduction

Having a good image of oneself as a language learner is an important factor contributing to the learner's acquisition of the target language. This is because learners' perception of target language competence is considered to affect anxiety associated with learning, motivation for learning the language, and willingness to communicate in the language. Therefore, understanding of language learners' self-perception of target language ability would be of considerable value to researchers in the field, as well as language teachers.

Learners' self-perception of target language ability has been discussed in relation to their levels of language anxiety, for it is considered to be a source of anxiety in the target language classroom. Onwuegbuzie, Bailey and Daley (1999) suggested that there is a causal relationship between self-perception and language anxiety, and it is reciprocal; anxiety can be a cause of low self-perceived competence, but at the same time, it can also be an effect of low self-perceived competence. This is a suggested model, and Onwuegbuzie et al. did not investigate the relationship between the two. It was Kitano (2001) who investigated the relationship between the two in the Japanese as a foreign language classroom. Kitano's study focused on learners' self-ratings of speaking ability in the Japanese language. Results showed a moderate negative relationship between anxiety and self-ratings, and the conclusion was that anxiety amongst students was stronger when the learner perceived his or her speaking ability to be less developed than that of his or her peers. Investigating willingness to communicate in a second language (L2), L2 anxiety, perceived L2 competence, and L2 learning motivation amongst junior high school French immersion students, MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, and Donovan (2002) found significant negative correlations between anxiety and perceived competence. Results from their study also showed that those students who had higher perceived competence tended to have higher motivation towards learning French.

Although a number of studies have been conducted to explore the relationship between perceived language competence and anxiety, the majority of these have involved native English speakers learning a foreign language. There are only a small number of studies dealing with nonnative English speakers learning English. The association between the two in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings needs to be further explored. As I have researched language anxiety in the EFL classroom in Japan, I found that Japanese EFL

learners' levels of language anxiety were higher than those of language learners in other language learning settings. Many of the Japanese learners in my studies lacked self-confidence in their ability in English, and therefore, their self-perception of English ability seemed low. This low self-perception seemed to be associated with high levels of language anxiety.

This study investigates the relationship between language anxiety and self-perception of language competence amongst Japanese university EFL learners. The focus of this language competence will be on the speaking aspect. This is because my study (2004) showed that levels of anxiety amongst subjects were highest when speaking the language, and therefore, this aspect was thought to be more closely related to anxiety than other aspects of proficiency such as reading. As a variable which may be associated with perceived competence, strength of motivation for learning English will be investigated. Recently, Kondo-Brown (2006) found that self-perception of reading ability had direct associations with reading comprehension ability and kanji knowledge in the Japanese as a foreign language classroom. In Kondo-Brown's study, higher perceived competence was associated with higher ability. In the present study, as another variable possibly related to perceived ability, actual ability in the English language will be investigated. It may be interesting to see whether perceived competence or actual language ability is more highly associated with language anxiety.

2 Research Questions

The major research questions of the present study are:

1. Is self-perception of English ability negatively related to language anxiety?
2. Is self-perception of English ability positively related to strength of motivation?
3. Is self-perception of English ability positively related to English proficiency?

3 Methodology

3.1 Subjects

The subjects were 98 Japanese students enrolled in EFL courses at two universities in Niigata-City, Japan. All the subjects were freshmen: 64 males and 34 females ranging in age from 18 to 20. All of them majored in science. The average age of the students was 19. Sixty-four were from two English classes (English I) at one university, and 34 were from one English class (Standard English) at another university. At both universities, these English classes were one-semester courses starting in April and ending in July and were required of all first-year students. All the classes met once a week and lasted 90 minutes. All subjects were of Japanese nationality and shared a native language (Japanese).

3.2 Measurement instruments

The data was gathered in 2007. A questionnaire including the Can-do Scale (15 items), the Strength of Motivation Scale (7 items), and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS, 33 items) was introduced to the subjects in June. The questionnaire items are presented in the Appendix A.

The Can-do scale was developed by Clark (1981) in order to measure self-ratings of speaking proficiency. Kitano (2001) modified the scale in order to use it in Japanese language learning situations. In the present study, Kitano's modified version was used. An example of an item on the scale was "I can ask for directions on the street in English."

The Strength of Motivation Scale was developed by Ely (1986) for measuring motivational strength amongst university students in a foreign language classroom. An example of an item on the scale was "Outside the class, I almost never think about what I'm learning in class."

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale was developed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). This instrument was designed to elicit language learner's self-reports regarding anxiety, and it is the most widely used anxiety measurement instrument. An example of an item on the scale was "I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class."

All the scales were originally written in English, and a translated Japanese version of the scales was used. The three scales were modified to use in the Japanese EFL classroom, such as replacing the term "foreign language" with "English language."

For the Can-do Scale, a three-point Likert response scale was used for each item, a practice originally conducted by Kitano (2001) on the scale. A student's endorsement of "quite easily" was equated with a numerical value of 3, "with some difficulty" with 2, and "with great difficulty or not at all" with 1. A higher score on the scale indicated a higher level of self-perception. The possible scores on the scale ranged from 15 to 45 (3×15).

For the Strength of Motivation Scale and the FLCAS, each item was scored on a five-point Likert response scale: 5 (strongly agree), 4 (agree), 3 (neither agree nor disagree), 2 (disagree), and 1 (strongly disagree). A higher score on the motivation scale and the FLCAS indicated a higher level of motivation and debilitating anxiety, respectively. These two scales included some reversed items, and for these items, the numerical values were reversed when computed. The possible scores on the motivation scale ranged from 7 to 35 (5×7) and on the FLCAS, from 33 to 165 (5×33).

On completion of the data collection, first, each scale was tested for reliability. After the reliability was established, a series of correlation analyses were performed between the scales and the proficiency test.

3.3 English proficiency measurement

In order to measure the English proficiency of the students, a C-test (Takahashi 2004) was used. The C-test technique has been used for testing linguistic proficiency in a foreign or a

second language, and C-tests receive wide support as theoretically and empirically valid and reliable measures of language ability (Klein-Braley and Raatz 1984). In the present study, the subjects' overall English ability measured by the C-test was used as the English proficiency measure. The C-test consisted of approximately 320 words. Starting from the second sentence, the second half of every second word was deleted in each passage. The overall number of deletions in the test was 100. The test was administered to the subjects in April, 2007. The test is presented in the Appendix B.

4 Results

The Can-do Scale yielded internal consistency of .84 using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The internal consistency of the Strength of Motivation Scale was .79 and of the FLCAS, was .92. The reliabilities of the scales in the present study were compared with the reliabilities of previous studies. Table 1 shows this comparison.

Table 1 Reliabilities of the scales in comparison with previous studies

Can-do Scale	Present Study $\alpha = .84$, N=98	Kitano, 2001 $\alpha = .92$, N=212	
Strength of Motivation Scale	Present Study $\alpha = .79$, N=98	Takahashi, 2004 $\alpha = .75$, N=308	Ely, 1986 $\alpha = .86$, N=50
FLCAS	Present Study $\alpha = .92$, N=98	Horwitz, 1991 $\alpha = .93$, N=108	Aida, 1994 $\alpha = .94$, N=96

* α =Cronbach's alpha ; N=number of subjects

The high alpha of the FLCAS in the present study shows that it was a highly reliable scale and was effective in measuring language anxiety. Compared with the alphas from previous studies, the Strength of Motivation Scale and the Can-do Scale yielded relatively high alphas, and this means they are reliable instruments. The mean average score, standard deviation, and score range (with possible range) on the Can-do Scale were: M (mean)=30.04, SD (standard deviation)=6.98, R (actual range)=16-45 (possible range=15-45). The mean average of this scale from Kitano's study was not available, and therefore, I cannot compare these figures with the previous study. However, the present subjects' self-perception of English proficiency might not be high considering they were science majors, who were likely to think that they were not good at foreign languages. The same statistical data for the Motivational Strength Scale was M=22.40, SD=5.27, R=7-34 (7-35). The mean average of 22.40 was somewhat lower than that of 23.64 in my previous study (Takahashi 2004), suggesting that the strength of motivation of the present subjects was not as high as that of the subjects in the previous study. One reason for this may again be attributed to the major of the students. For them, learning English might have not been top priority. For the FLCAS, the mean average was 104.60, standard deviation was 20.20, and the range was 57-150 (33-165). This

mean average was higher than those from the previous three studies ($M=94.5$ in Horwitz, 96.7 in Aida, and 101.5 in Takahashi). The high levels of language anxiety in the present study might once again be partly explained by the subjects being science majors, as well as other factors.

The mean average score and standard deviations of the English proficiency test were calculated: $M=72.96$ (full score= 100) and $SD=8.86$.

After the reliability was established, in order to investigate relationships between self-perception of English proficiency, language anxiety, strength of motivation, and English proficiency, a correlation analysis was performed between the scales and the test. Table 2 presents the results from the correlation analysis.

Table 2 Correlations between the scales and the test

	S-perception	Anxiety	Motivation	Proficiency
S-Perception		-.269**	.243*	.249*
Anxiety	-.269**		-.250*	(-.131)
Motivation	.243*	-.250*		(-.021)
Proficiency	.249*	(-.131)	(-.021)	

* **= $p<.01$; *= $p<.05$

All of the three variables correlated with self-perception of English proficiency, although weakly. Of all the correlations between self-perception and the other variables, the strongest one was with language anxiety, and it was a negative one. This indicates that students with higher self-perception of speaking ability displayed lower levels of anxiety. Motivational strength positively correlated with self-perception, indicating that motivated students had higher self-perception. English proficiency positively correlated with self-perception, suggesting that a learner whose self-perception of speaking ability was higher tended to have higher proficiency.

In order to investigate particular attributes of self-perceived proficiency, language anxiety and strength of motivation, I carried out an item analysis of the scales. The items which received the highest and the lowest endorsements were examined. For the Can-do Scale, the items with the strongest endorsement were the following (the mean average endorsements are marked in parentheses):

Item 1: I can say the days of the week in English. (2.92 [maximum score = 3.00])

Item 2: I can give the current date (month, day, year) in English. (2.52)

The vast majority of the students thought that they could say the days of the week in English (Item 1). Most of them also thought that they could give the current date in English (Item 2). As the subjects of this study were first-year university students, this is no surprise.

On the other hand, the items which received the lowest endorsement were the following (the mean average endorsements are marked in parentheses):

Item 15: I can describe in English the role played by Japanese business corporations in the world market. (1.00 [minimum score = 1.00])

Item 13: I can describe the educational system of my own country in some detail in English. (1.01)

Item 11: I can sustain everyday conversation in very polite style in English with a person much older than I am. (1.02)

As the average endorsement of 1.00 indicated, almost all the subjects thought that they could not describe in English the role played by Japanese business corporations in the world market (Item 15). This might be difficult even in their native language, especially since the subjects were science majors and might not be interested in business. The vast majority of them thought that they could not describe the Japanese educational system in English (Item 13). Although doing this in their native language might not be difficult for them, doing it in English might be difficult. Most of them perceived that they could not sustain conversation in very polite style in English with a senior person (Item 11). It may well be that many of them had never had a conversation in English with a native-English speaker, with the possible exception of their English teacher in the classroom. If this was the case, it was natural for them to think that they could not carry out an English conversation in polite style with a native speaker, especially when the person was much older than themselves.

For the FLCAS, the following were items which elicited the strongest endorsements:

Item 12: I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers (reversed item). (4.17 [maximum score = 5.00])

Item 19: I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for my English class (reversed item). (4.06)

Item 7: I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in my English class. (3.93)

Two of these items were dealing with English speaking situations, suggesting that the subjects became most anxious when speaking English. The strongest endorsement on Item 12 is conceivable since most of them were not trained to speak English enough to be able to carry on conversations. In addition, they were not used to speaking English with native-English speakers. The majority of them felt pressure to prepare for the English class (Item 19). Perhaps, their teachers demanded that they make good preparations. We can imagine that answering questions without preparation could be a stressful experience (Item 7).

The items which received the lowest endorsement were:

Item 14: I often feel like not going to my English class. (1.78 [minimum score = 1.00])

Item 18: The more I study for an English test, the more confused I get. (2.24)

Item 22: My English class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind. (2.24)

As the high mean average of total score shows, the subjects felt anxious in the English classroom, but their anxiety did not make them feel like skipping English classes (Item 14). It may well be that they did not want to fail the English course: some students actually thought that as long as they attended the class, the teacher would not fail them. The subjects seemed to know how to study for their English tests (Item 18). This asset may have been gained through their experiences of studying examination English. Many of them did not think their class moved quickly and they were left behind (Item 22).

For the Motivational Strength Scale, the items with the strongest endorsement were the following:

Item 7: I don't really feel that learning English is valuable to me (reversed item).(4.02
[maximum score = 5.00])

Item 4: I want to be able to use English in a wide variety of situations. (4.01)

The majority of subjects realized that the English language was valuable to them (Item 7). Even though they were science majors, not good at English, and not willing to learn the language, they understood that learning English was of value to them. The strong endorsement of Item 4 indicates the desire the subjects showed to be able to use English.

On the other hand, no one item received low average endorsement of less than 2.5. This may indicate seemingly high motivation of the subjects towards learning English. However, the mean average of the total score showed that motivational strength was not very high amongst the subjects.

5 Discussion of Findings

5.1 Relationship between self-perception of English proficiency and language anxiety

Students who self-perceived to have higher English proficiency showed lower levels of language anxiety in the EFL classroom. This result supports findings from Kitano (2001) and MacIntyre et al. (2002), both of which found a negative relationship between self-perceived competence and anxiety. It may well be that when an English learner thinks his/her ability is higher than that of his/her classmates', he/she gains confidence in learning. The learner may also have positive attitudes towards learning. These may contribute to reducing language anxiety which the learner might have had. Perhaps one way to reduce levels of anxiety in the classroom is to build up students' self-image as good language learners. We consider this on the assumption that self-perceived inability causes anxiety. That is what Kitano suggests. Kitano proposes that language anxiety is not the cause of inability, but rather the effect of learners' perception of inability. This cause-and-effect relationship seems especially applicable to beginning level students whose language anxiety has not fully

developed yet. Kitano's argument seems reasonable. However, Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999) suggest a reciprocal relationship between the two. In order to unravel the cause-and-effect relationship, we need to conduct longitudinal research.

5.2 Relationship between self-perception of English proficiency and strength of motivation

Motivation is believed to be one of the main determinants of foreign/second language learning achievement, and the positive relationship between language ability and strength of motivation is confirmed in previous studies such as Sawaki (1997), Takahashi (2004), and Kondo-Brown (2006). The present study aimed to investigate whether or not this relationship applies to motivational intensity and perceived competence. The results showed that students who perceived themselves to have higher English proficiency had stronger motivation towards learning the language. This finding supports the above-mentioned previous study by MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, and Donovan (2002), which found a positive association between higher perceived competence and higher motivation in the French immersion classroom in Canada. Highly motivated learners have positive attitudes towards learning, study hard and are likely to get good marks, and, because of this, they perceive their language competence higher than that of their peers. The positive relationship may be reciprocal: perception of high English ability probably contributes to having high motivation for learning English.

5.3 Relationship between self-perception of English proficiency and actual proficiency

As expected, self-perception was positively related to English proficiency: students who perceived their proficiency was higher than others actually scored higher in the test. Perception of high proficiency might have facilitated learners' performance, and at the same time, high performance might have led to better self-perception. However, the positive relationship between the two was weak ($r=.249, p<.05$). Self-perceived competence showed a stronger relationship (negative) with anxiety than with actual competence. Assuming that self-perception of English competence reflects the learner's actual language competence, the relationship between the two should be stronger.

The weak relationship may suggest that perceived competence is a complicated construct: it consists of not only self-perception of linguistic ability but also other factors. Self-confidence in the language, attitudes towards learning English, willingness to communicate, and desire to be able to communicate in English are possible factors. Because it consists of several different factors, self-perceived competence did not show a higher relationship with actual linguistic competence. Dealing with only the speaking aspect of language proficiency may be another reason why the association was not so strong: if the students were asked to rate their overall proficiency, the relationship might have been stronger.

5.4 Other relationships between variables

Other associations investigated were relationships between: language anxiety and

strength of motivation; anxiety and English proficiency; and strength of motivation and English proficiency.

Students with higher levels of language anxiety showed weaker motivation for learning English. This result supports a previous study by Muchnick and Wolfe (1982), which found that positive motivation to learn Spanish was associated with a lack of anxiety in the classroom. The negative relationship was also obtained in my previous study (Takahashi 2004). Motivated learners perceive the learning experience positively and tend to be successful, and both of these may decrease anxiety. However, the converse may also be true. When learners' levels of anxiety are low, they are more relaxed and are able to receive more meaningful input, which may lead to higher marks and to higher motivation. Probably, the negative relationship between the two is reciprocal.

Results from the present study failed to find relationships between English proficiency and anxiety, and between proficiency and strength of motivation. Interestingly, anxiety and motivational strength were not related to actual proficiency, although in my previous study (Takahashi 2004), I found a weak negative relationship between language anxiety and proficiency, and a weak positive relationship between motivation and proficiency. One reason for this is that the C-test used was not constructed well. Although the proficiency test showed reliability in the previous study (Takahashi 2004), it may somehow have not been so reliable in the present study. This may partly explain the above-mentioned weak relationship between self-perceived proficiency and actual proficiency.

6 Conclusions

The present study investigated whether or not English learners' self-perception of proficiency was related to language anxiety and motivational intensity in the classroom. It also aimed at discovering if self-perception of proficiency was related to proficiency measured by a proficiency test. Self-perception was related to all the three variables: negatively with anxiety, and positively with motivational strength and proficiency. Although the present study did not investigate the cause-and-effect relationships between variables, the associations of perceived competence with other variables are hypothesized to be reciprocal. In order to examine these relationships thoroughly, longitudinal research is needed.

A limitation of this study is that it dealt with only the speaking aspect of self-perceived proficiency. Probably because of this, the correlations obtained with other variables were not highly significant. In order to investigate the true nature of self-perceived foreign language ability, other aspects need to be explored. It may also be interesting to see whether or not self-perceived competence is related to class achievement. Language proficiency and language class achievement are two different concepts, both of which show certain aspects of language ability. Future research is needed to investigate these areas.

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Appendix A: Measurement Instruments

[1] Can-do Scale (mean average endorsement)

- 1 I can say the days of the week in English. (2.92)
- 2 I can give the current date (month, day, year) in English. (2.52)
- 3 I can order a simple meal in a restaurant in English. (1.68)
- 4 I can ask for directions on the street in English. (1.86)
- 5 I can buy clothes in a department store in English. (1.55)
- 6 I can introduce myself in social situations, and use appropriate greetings and leave-taking expressions in English. (1.79)
- 7 I can talk about my favorite hobby at some length in English. (1.53)

- 8 I can describe my present job, studies, or other major life activities in English. (1.37)
- 9 I can explain what I did last weekend at some length in English. (1.43)
- 10 I can explain what I plan to be doing 5 years from now at some length in English. (1.21)
- 11 I can sustain everyday conversation in very polite style in English with a person much older than I am. (1.02)
- 12 I can sustain everyday conversation in casual style English with my native-English-speaking friend. (1.16)
- 13 I can describe the educational system of my own country in some detail in English. (1.01)
- 14 I can state and support with reasons my position on a conversational topic (for example, cigarette smoking) in English. (1.09)
- 15 I can describe in English the role played by Japanese business corporations in the world market. (1.00)

[2] Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (mean average endorsement)

- 1 I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class. (3.22)
- 2 I don't worry about making mistakes in my English class. (reversed item) (3.27)
- 3 I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in my English class. (2.43)
- 4 It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English classes. (reversed item) (2.89)
- 5 During my English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course. (3.45)
- 6 I am usually at ease during tests in my English class. (reversed item) (2.99)
- 7 I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in my English class. (3.93)
- 8 I worry about the consequences of failing my English class. (3.85)
- 9 I don't understand why some people get so upset over English classes. (reversed item) (3.68)
- 10 In my English class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know. (2.76)
- 11 It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class. (3.70)
- 12 I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers. (reversed item) (4.17)
- 13 Even if I am well prepared for my English class, I feel anxious about it. (2.88)
- 14 I often feel like not going to my English class. (1.78)
- 15 I feel confident when I speak in my English class. (reversed item) (3.64)
- 16 I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make. (2.51)
- 17 I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in my English class. (2.99)
- 18 The more I study for an English test, the more confused I get. (2.24)
- 19 I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for my English class. (reversed item) (4.06)
- 20 I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do. (3.73)
- 21 I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students. (3.01)
- 22 My English class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind. (2.24)
- 23 I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in my other classes. (2.41)
- 24 When I'm on my way to my English class, I feel very sure and relaxed. (reversed item) (3.84)
- 25 I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says. (2.85)

- 26 I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak English. (3.43)
 27 I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English. (2.59)
 28 I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English. (reversed item)(3.46)
 29 I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance. (3.70)
 30 It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English. (2.60)
 31 I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am. (3.68)
 32 I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting. (3.47)
 33 I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class. (2.85)

[3] Strength of Motivation Scale (mean average endorsement)

- 1 Outside of class, I almost never think about what I'm learning in English class. (reversed item)(2.55)
 2 If possible, I would like to take a more advanced English course. (2.78)
 3 Speaking realistically, I would say that I don't try very hard to learn English. (reversed item)(2.79)
 4 I want to be able to use English in a wide variety of situations. (4.01)
 5 I don't really have a great desire to learn a lot of English. (reversed item)(3.41)
 6 Learning English well is not really a high priority for me at this point. (reversed item)(2.84)
 7 I don't really feel that learning English is valuable to me. (reversed item)(4.02)

Appendix B: Proficiency Test

C-test

- A. Mary works at a bank. She beg___ working a___ eight o'cl___ in th___ morning. S___ stops wor___ at fi___ o'clock i___ the after___. At fi___ o'clock t___ bank clo___. Everybody go___ home. So___ people dri___ home. So___ people ta___ the tr___. Some people take the bus.
- B. Jack and Ann are married. They are not happy together. Why not? They ar___ very diff___. Jack smo___. Ann doe___ smoke. Ja___ likes t___ watch base___ on T___. Ann doe___ like base___. Ann lik___ loud mus___. Jack doe___ like lo___ music. Ja___ snores a___ night. A___ can't sle___. One d___, Ann loo___ at t___ house ne___ door. It is for sale. Ann buys the house and moves in.
- C. Camille was three years old. She lived in a small town in France. Her fat___ worked fa___ away i___ the ci___. Her mot___ worked i___ the ho___. One Satu___, Camille's mot___ fell do___ on th___ floor. H___ eyes we___ closed. Sh___ did n___ move. Cami___ father w___ home. H___ called th___ doctor o___ the telephone. The doctor came to help Camille's mother.

D. Mr. Jones was very angry with his wife, and she was very angry with her husband. For seven days they did not speak to each other at all. One evening Mr. Jones was very tired when he came back from work, so he wanted to be home soon after dinner. Of course, he did not say anything to Mrs. Jones before he went upstairs. Mrs. Jones washed the dinner things and then did some sewing.

E. Early one morning, an old woman was walking from her village to the town, carrying a big sack of cabbages on her head. She was taking them to the market, where she hoped to sell them to the people from the town. The road which the old woman was on was a narrow one over a mountain. There was a cliff on one side, and a wall of rock on the other.