

Anxiety in Learning a Foreign Language

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Problem statement

How detrimental or useful can anxiety be for a foreign language learner? The trigger sets off some observations in teaching experience on students' behaviour with symptoms of anxiety such as tenseness, trembling, perspiring and palpitations, and longer than usual speech pauses with frequent speech fillings.

Method

The research bases on the secondary data analysis, and as such deals with the definition of anxiety as a psychological phenomenon and its different types. Particularly, emphasis is put on searching for language anxiety, especially in the process of learning a foreign language, and whether it may exert a negative or positive influence on foreign language learners. For example, language anxiety can be in the a form of apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a foreign/second language with which an individual is not fully proficient. It can be seen as a stable personality trait referring to the propensity for an individual to react in a nervous manner when speaking, listening, reading, or writing in the second language (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993).

Anxiety is commonly described by psychologists as a

state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object. Because anxiety is clearly an emotional state, it is generated through the arousal of the limbic system, the primitive, subcortical "chasis" of the cerebrum, which plays an important, though indirect, role in many kinds of human enterprises, including communication. (Hilgard, Atkinson, and Atkinson, 1971; Lamendella, 1977; cited in Scovel, 1978)

That means, the students who try not to speak much, instead of giving shorter answers avoiding the teacher's and peers' attention, turn out to be anxious. The same behaviour could be noticed in the way how they produce writing tasks in the classroom. Daly and Miller's finding might be taken as a corroborating evidence to that behaviour, they have found that 'students with higher levels of writing anxiety write shorter compositions and qualify their writing less than their calmer counterparts do' (1975: 176).

Another detrimental type of anxiety is 'overstudying' which as Horwitz et al define that 'students who are overly concerned about their performance may become so anxious when they make errors, they attempt to compensate by studying even more' (1986: 126). It is understandable that the student may be thinking about the final results already and how he is going to behave instead of concentrating on what must be performed at the exam. It may also be explained by the student's incorrect choice of learning strategy due to lack of, for example, the young age. It could also be said that they have not received enough help from their parents and the teacher in reducing the anxiety.

One of the views which takes the positive influence part of anxiety in the applied psychology is that anxiety is 'a future-oriented mood state in which one is ready or prepared to attempt to cope with upcoming negative events' (Barlow, 2000: 1249), which suggests that it is a distinction between future dangers in relation to the present time that separates anxiety from fear. Here, anxiety is considered to be a normal reaction to stress. It may help a person to deal with a difficult situation, assuming that anxiety may help one in the cases when a high concentration is needed provided a person's or a whole group's life or something very important depends on his or her action being taken at that moment. In this case, anxiety can border with a high responsibility and be confused to be clearly differentiated. Therefore, this positive occurrence of anxiety could be considered to be useful affecting the owner of the action on an emotional level.

As far as the usefulness, anxiety was noticed in the language learning sphere where it helped students at the definite parts of testing process. For example, Chastain (1976) while testing two different language groups of students found out two different results, negative and positive impact of anxiety. One group had been taught with audio-lingual method, the other one with traditional method. Chastain was looking for the correlation between student scores on tests and anxiety. The audio-lingual method group showed a negative correlation with anxiety but the traditional method group got a positive correlation. He assumes that a little anxiety might be helpful during a test, but if it is too much, it may lead to a low performance. Facilitating anxiety was also found

in Kleinmann's (1977) research where he wanted to find the relationship between the avoidance behaviour and anxiety. The assumption was that the helping anxiety would inspire students during the test to use the certain English language structure which they would not use in their native language because of its complexity in the usage. Eventually, Kleinmann's hypothesis came proved true as the Arabic and Spanish students equipped with some anxiety had used the particular structures in the English language which they were not supposed to use due to their difficulty in their mother tongue. Nevertheless, however diligent the researchers are in searching of the positive sides of this phenomenon, anxiety might become dangerous if it is too much.

Concluding discussion

As a finding from the secondary data analysis and as an implication of anxiety in the classroom it could be proposed that anxiety may be two – folded: helpful and harmful. It can lead to a success if it is in small portions, but if it overflows, it may be disruptive or even take a form of an illness. In order to be able to inspire students towards successful learning of a foreign language and decrease anxiety, teachers may take guidance from Schwartz's (1972 :73) classification of motivational factors of learning a language. Chastain (1976 :105) suggests Schwartz's classification in more improved way where he differentiates two influential learner variables: intrinsic and extrinsic. Among intrinsic motivational variables, he includes the motivators such as anxiety, need to achieve, self – concepts and aspirations. And, socio – cultural influences and social enhancers are referred to the extrinsic motivational factors in learning a language.

Another important part of the educational process is evaluation of the student's foreign language skills. Sometimes we, teachers overlook the psychological side of the life of students at school. While evaluating their students' English language level, teachers should be careful in differentiating the lack of knowledge of a student from the anxiety which the student is experiencing. In other words, teachers should be possibly able to observe and reveal anxiety, and differentiate it from human beings' weaknesses such as laziness or understudying, as Culler and Holahan (1980) speculate that anxiety may be caused by deficits in students' learning or study skills. It would be ideal for us, teachers to be able to foresee the probable stages of the lesson or exam when anxiety arises in order to take remedial actions beforehand and reduce the destructive effects of language anxiety.

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