The Role of the Teacher in Alleviating Anxiety in Language Classes

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ABSTRACT: The use of modern communicative language teaching approaches in the language classrooms and the wide-spread use of English Language have increased the demand to learn good communication skills but existence such feelings in the learners may prevent them from achieving the desired goal. Consideration of learners’ anxiety reactions in learning to speak another language by a language teacher is deemed highly important in order to assist them to achieve the intended performance goals in the target language. The purpose behind the present paper is to find out and suggest some strategies for language teachers in order to alleviate language anxiety in the learners.

Keywords: anxiety, language learning classes, language teachers

INTRODUCTION

Second or Foreign Language Anxiety

Anxiety has been found to interfere with many types of learning but when it is associated with learning a second or foreign language it is termed as ‘second/foreign language anxiety’. It is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon (Young, 1991: cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999) and can be defined as “a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system” (McIntyre & Gardner, 1994: cited in 1999). It has been found that the feelings of tension or nervousness centre on the two basic task requirements of foreign language learning: listening and speaking (Horwitz et al., 1986) because, in interaction, both the skills cannot be separated.

What Causes Language Anxiety?

What causes language anxiety is a central question of this research study and is of interest to all language teachers and learners, as well as SLA scholars who are interested in anxiety and learning. Considering anxiety as a highly influential construct in language learning, SLA researchers have tried to investigate the sources or reasons that language anxiety can stem from within both academic and social contexts, and have suggested a variety of strategies to cope with it. The fact that language anxiety is a psychological construct, it most likely stems from the learner’s own ‘self’, i.e., as an intrinsic motivator (Schwartz, 1972; cited in Scovel 1991), e.g., his or her self perceptions, perceptions about others (peers, teachers, interlocutors, etc.) and target language communication situations, his/her beliefs about L2/FL learning etc. Language anxiety may be a result as well as a cause of insufficient command of the target language (Sparks and Ganschow; cited in Horwitz, 2001). That is to say it may be experienced due to linguistic difficulties L2/FL learners face in learning and using the target language. Within social contexts, language anxiety may be experienced due to extrinsic motivators (Schwartz, 1972; cited in Scovel, 1991), such as different social and cultural environments, particularly the environments where L1 and L2/FL learning takes place. Also, the target language is a representation of another cultural community; there is a predisposition among some people to experience such anxiety because of their own concerns about ethnicity, foreignness, and the like (Gardner cited in Horwitz & Young, 1991). Social status of the speaker and the interlocutor, a sense of power relations between them, and gender could also be important factors in causing language anxiety for L2/FL speakers. A further detailed investigation of these factors could potentially assist language teachers to alleviate anxiety in the classroom setting and to make the classroom environment less anxiety-provoking and hence to improve learners’ performance in the target language.

It was only in late twentieth century, in the 1970s, that the SLA researchers began to study the significant role played by personality and motivational variables in second language acquisition (Shams, 2006). They posited...
that, in order to gain a holistic understanding of this process, learners’ affective variables need to be taken into account to cater for their needs and interests (Samimy, 1994). Attention has diverted to studying the role of affective variables like ‘learning styles’, motivation, personality traits, etc. that can impede the process of learning and speaking a second/foreign language. Among these affective variables, learner anxiety has come to be recognized as an important area of study in second language acquisition because of the negative influence it can have on students’ performance.

Some researchers reported a negative relationship between language anxiety and achievement, e.g. the higher the anxiety, the lower the performance, (Clement, Gardner, & Smythe, 1977, 1980: cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). Others reported no relationship, or a positive relationship (Pimsleur, Mosberg, & Morrison, 1962, Backman, 1976, Scovel, 1978: cited in 1999). More recently, Horwitz (2001) has reiterated that the issue of understanding the relationship between anxiety and achievement is unresolved. The reason for these mixed results is perhaps, as stated by Philip (cited in Shams, 2006), that “a comparison of the experimental research examining the relationship between anxiety and second language learning is, to a degree, perplexing, presenting some conflicting evidence and illustrating that anxiety is a complex, multi-faceted construct.” In addition to the negative effects of anxiety on language learning and performance, anxiety has occasionally been found to facilitate language learning. Anxiety, in its debilitating and facilitating forms, serves simultaneously to motivate and to warn the learner. Facilitating anxiety “motivates the learner to “fight” the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approach behaviour” (1991). Debilitating anxiety, in contrast, “motivates the learner to “flee” the new learning task; it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behaviour” (1991).

Learners’ anxiety while speaking an L2/FL is manifested in a variety of different ways, which sends some signals for the interlocutors to identify the anxiety-related behaviours. Language instructors can recognize these behaviours and then can begin to explore their instructional strategies to alleviate learners’ anxiety (Tanveer, 2007). The various manifestations of anxiety that the participants mentioned seem to be similar to what has been reported in the past research on language anxiety. No essential difference of opinions or details has been found regarding the symptoms of student anxiety. The obvious signs of anxious students described by the participants were blushing, rubbing the palms, perspiration, staggered voice, reluctance, poor performance in spoken activities, less enthusiasm or willingness to speak, less interpretativeness, less eye-contact, reading from the script while giving presentation, either too fast or too slow speed of speech, etc. Furthermore, some learners stated that they try to avoid the situation that appears to be anxiety evoking. These results seem to indicate that language teachers can accurately and credibly decode the symptoms of anxious behaviour in the language class and can deal with them accordingly. Young (1992, 169: cited in Ohata, 2005) presented a few suggestion to language teachers in this respect: “a) be sensitive to the signals students’ provide, b) recognize the behaviours for what they are, c) trust your perceptions, and d) work to reduce language anxiety”.

**Anxiety-producing factors**

The results indicated the existence of high levels of language anxiety in most of the learners. In addition, it emerges that there may be some cultural reasons behind the anxiety reactions of some learners (Jones, 2004). Adopting or achieving native (L1)-like pronunciation emerged as a big source of anxiety for language learners. The participants appeared to be blaming a strict and formal classroom environment as a significant cause of their language anxiety. Thus, these perceptions, can be considered a clear indication that the teachers should recognize that the language classroom could become a highly anxiety-provoking environment for students (Tsui, 1996: cited in Ohata, 2005). For many language learners formal language classroom setting was a major source of stress and anxiety because of its demand to be more correct and clearer in using the target language. According to participants of the study the more friendly and informal the language classroom environment, the less it is likely to be anxiety provoking. So learners feel more anxious and under stress in the classroom environments that follow the traditional learning systems where the learners have to constantly drill or repeat some tiresome tasks like machines (e.g. audio-lingual language teaching method). On the other hand, language learners reported to be less anxious and stressful in environments that emphasize collaborative activities among the teachers and the students. Giving a short talk, lecture or presentation in front of the class has also been reported to be highly anxiety inducing, one which makes the classroom environment more formal and stressful for the learners. According to Koch and Terrell (1991), Young (1990, cited in Young, 1991), and Price (1991), a large number of their subjects considered oral presentation as the most anxiety-provoking activity in the class. Some language teachers believe that students try to overcome their anxiety by trying to remember the presentation stuff and by rehearsing it, and then they bring another pressure on themselves by trying to remember what they have rehearsed and feel probably stressed because they cannot remember everything (Tanveer, 2007). The results of the past research supports the idea that language anxiety, for untold number of learners, has its origin in the fear of making mistakes and attracting the
derision of classmates" (Jones, 2004). Jones also argues that language learners feel afraid because of “a fear of appearing awkward, foolish and incompetent in the eyes of learners’ peers or others”. As a result of the fear of making mistakes, some learners expressed that learning and speaking a foreign language in the classroom is “always a problem”. In line with the study of Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) on ‘perfectionism’, fear of making mistakes has been found to be strongly linked with the learners’ concern to save their positive image or impression in the mind of their teacher and peers.

**Socio-Cultural contexts**

The social context, culture, social status, the sense of foreignness of the language learners has also been found to affect the L2/FL anxiety. For the subjects of this study, social factors were more important than linguistic factors in causing language anxiety.

**Exposure to the new language**

Due to limited exposure to English language in some countries like Iran, language learners face serious problems in the development of their communicative competency, which is troubling for L2/FL learners when they are required to speak (see e.g. Lightbown and Spada, 2006).

**Cultural differences**

The differences of cultures appeared to be an important anxiety-producing factor. The more uncertainty or unfamiliarity with the target language culture, the more it is likely to be anxiety provoking (Tanveer, 2007). The use of the term ‘losing face’, by the participant supports Jones’ (2004) view that language anxiety is a concern of face in different cultures. Similar to Jones’ (2004) findings about culture as a causal factor in Asian context, an experienced female teacher stated, “It is not anxiety just about language but differences in cultural practices.

**Social Status and self-identity**

Social status or social distance between interlocutors can have a considerable influence on communication (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977: cited in Carrier, 1999). Results of the present study showed that speakers’ sense of inferiority complex while talking to someone higher in status may cause stress or anxiety for them. According to Pica (1987: 4) unequal status between students and teachers can also be a source of anxiety for the students. This indicates that lack of confidence on one’s linguistic competence makes one feel inferior and apprehensive to communicate with someone having full command on language, e.g. native speakers (Peirce, 1995). It can also explain the source of intercultural communication apprehension where unequal linguistic competencies of L1 and FL/SL speakers can make the communication event stressful for L2/FL speakers. Speaking in a foreign language was found to be disturbing because of the fear that it might lead to the loss of one’s positive self-image or self-identity. Various researchers (Peirce, 1995: 18; Guiora, 1972; 1984; Rardin, 1988; and Leary, 1982: cited in Ohata, 2005) confirm social anxiety as a feeling of losing one’s self-identity which is deeply rooted in the first language.

**Coping with stress and anxiety in language classes**

Language anxiety has been found to make a huge difference in learning to speak a foreign language. Many researchers in their studies on language anxiety have suggested a variety of strategies to cope with this multifaceted dilemma. The most frequent suggestion learners make is to make the language classroom environment less formal and more friendly, one where students can make mistakes without looking or sounding inept (Constructivist theory of learning). Some teachers suggested that “instructors should create situations where students can feel successful in using English and avoid setting up the activities that increase the chances for the students to fail”. Others suggest a truly communicative approach where students are given chances to succeed even with imperfect language competence. Some emphasis on the use of drama-like and role-play activities, so that learners may feel safe in a pretended situation with a pretended identity (Suggestopedia). Some teachers say that instructions should be made clear and it should also be ensured that the students have sufficient ideas and lexis to fulfill the task (Tanveer, 2007). In order to make the classroom a safe and less anxiety-provoking place, the friendly and encouraging role of the teachers was stated as crucial. According to Tanveer (2007) a general feeling among the learners was that the students’ confidence should be developed to make mistakes while using the language. Teachers should talk about the role of mistakes to the language learners in the class. Teachers’ positive way of providing corrective and constructive feedback on errors rather than interrupting and correcting students when they are communicating was recommended. Some teachers suggest making private notes of the errors that learners make and then later address the whole class without saying the name of a specific learner. It was also suggested that students’ self-related cognitions and beliefs should be taken into account in order to successfully cope with language anxiety. It was generally maintained that teachers should take time to discuss or initiate
discussion in the class by pointing out that it is very common for students to feel uncomfortable, uneasy and anxious while speaking English, thus inviting their thoughts about its possible reasons as well as solutions. This discussion according to Tanveer (2007) would heighten their awareness that the feelings of anxiety are common in most of the learners and are not associated with any particular individual. Thus, it would also help them to take away the feeling of competition or comparison that others are all smarter and more confident (Price, 1991). Moreover, Students should be encouraged to think about their positive personality traits and thus gather their own strengths and build upon them. This way, instructors can “build students’ confidence and self-esteem in their second/foreign language ability via encouragement, reassurance, positive reinforcement, and empathy” (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). Language teachers should identify the signs of perfectionism in the learners and should work to explore their earlier belief systems in order to help them to step down from the set standards at the early stages and then work patiently to achieve the desired standards gradually. Ceasing to make English native-speaker pronunciation as a model to alleviate language anxiety is another effective strategy that teacher should pay attention to. Another strategy was to abandon the practice of giving summative feedback in the form of grades and marks. An Omani ESL/EFL Practitioner suggests promoting a single sex class in order to reduce the anxiety and stress from the language learners in the class.

**Alleviation of Foreign/Second Language Anxiety**

Identifying anxiety producing factors for L2/FL learners and recognizing learner manifestations of this anxiety while communicating in the target language are important first steps in coping with language anxiety. An extensive body of research has suggested a variety of strategies to cope with language anxiety in academic settings, which can also offer an understanding of how to deal with it in the broader social contexts. In general, the remediation of such anxiety has focused on cognitive, affective, and behavioural approaches (Hembree, 1988, cited in Ying-Ling & Kondo: 2004). The cognitive approach holds that the thinking disturbances that occur in the classroom are the primary sources of anxiety. The researchers recommend a ‘cognitive modification (CM)’ method for its treatment which focuses on changing the students’ own cognitive appraisals (Mejias et al., 1991). Students are encouraged to develop more positive and facilitating self-talk and are taught to manage their self-evaluation more realistically. The affective approach attempts to change the negative involuntary association between the classroom and anxiety, and assumes that emotional arousal (physiological responsiveness) is the main concern (Ying-Ling & Kondo, 2004).

Researchers suggest taking steps to control bodily reactions and stress in order to alleviate anxiety and recommend systematic desensitization therapy (SDT) as a treatment method. The students are taught how to relax in the presence of the anxiety stimuli and, thus, the anxiety is reduced in the subsequent oral communication situations (Mejias et al., 1991). Those who take the behavioural approach presume poor academic skills as the main source of anxiety (Ying-Ling & Kondo, 2004). For its treatment, the researchers recommend skills training (ST) method where the students are taught the behavioural skills required for success in particular oral communication context (Mejias et al., 1991). Research on language anxiety suggests a variety of techniques to reduce or successfully cope with language anxiety. Foss and Reitzel (cited in Young, 1991) hold that the recognition of students’ irrational beliefs or fears and their unrealistic expectations can help students interpret anxiety-producing situations more realistically and adopt an approach rather than ‘avoiding behaviour’. They recommend verbalization or articulation of any fears as a strategy to cope with language anxiety.

Young (1990) also offered some suggestions in this regard such as: (1) using an anxiety graph to pinpoint the highest level of anxiety of a given interaction; (2) for anxieties stemming from learner’s personality, providing supplemental instruction or a support group; (3) for anxieties stemming from classroom procedures, using more pair and group work; (4) playing language games with an emphasis on problem-solving; and (5) role-playing with preparatory activities to instill class rapport. Furthermore, he found that the students felt more at ease when the instructors’ manner of error correction was not harsh and when they were friendly, patient, and had a good sense of humour. So, it can also be suggested that equal status relationship between teacher and student is an important aspect for anxiety alleviation. Hauck and Hurd (2005) offered a list of eleven such strategies; See appendix (8) for the list.

A number of studies on L2/FL anxiety have reported the enervating effect it can cast on learning and particularly speaking a second/foreign language; this must be overcome by students in order for them to take full advantage of L2/FL instructions (Horwitz et al., 1986). How learners’ perceive the language learning process, their perceptions about themselves and how they should be performing in any communicative event, and the linguistic obstacles they encounter while communicating in English have been found to be strongly linked with language anxiety.
The vital role of the language teachers

Students' embarrassment may be aggravated by the role played by language instructors in the class (Horwitz et al., 1986; Price, 1991; Young, 1991; Brandl, 1987; Young, 1990: cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). The teachers' attitude towards and beliefs about language learning and teaching, their reaction to the learners' errors, and the way they create stressful environment in the class have been reported to be significantly related to second/foreign language anxiety (Tanveer, 2007). Many language learners think that the authoritative, embarrassing and humiliating attitude of the teachers towards students, particularly when they make mistakes, can have severe consequences on learners' cognition and their willingness to communicate in the class. A learner's mistake, as Jones (2004) views, "may bring about humiliating punishment from the teacher under the concentrated gaze of one's peers". Jones criticizes those instructors he kill the classroom time for performance rather than learning.

Suggestions for language teachers

Language anxiety can dramatically influence the process of language learning and teaching. Therefore, it is necessary that language teachers not only recognize that anxiety is a major cause of students' lack of success in the new language but also assist them to tackle the feelings of unease and discomfort. Consideration of language learners' anxiety reactions by a language teacher is deemed highly important in order to assist them to achieve the intended performance goals in the target language (Tanveer, 2007). Based on the findings of similar researches in this regard, the following helpful recommendations can be made.

1) Language teachers should acknowledge the existence of the feeling of anxiety and stress among the language learners and should apply quick and effective strategies to help them cope with those destructive feelings.

2) A truly communicative approach in language teaching should be adopted to provide those language learners who have limited exposure to English language with more chances to fully practice their speaking skills.

3) Creating a friendly, informal and learning-supportive environments for language learning by teachers' friendly, helpful and cooperative behaviour, making students feel comfortable when speaking in the class. This can also reduce the effect of social and status difference between students and teachers to a considerable extent (Tanveer, 2007).

4) Teachers should encourage those learners who are afraid of making mistakes to feel free to make mistakes in order to acquire communication skills. As for a positive response to students' concern over the harsh manner of teachers' error correction, teachers' selection of error correction techniques as Horwitz et al. (1986) recommended, should be based upon instructional philosophy and on reducing defensive reactions in students.

5) To reduce the students' fear that their mistakes in front of the teachers will influence their end of course grades, more emphasis should be given to formative assessment (assessment for learning) and feedback rather than summative assessment (assessment of learning) and feedback.

6) Sometimes language teachers should initiate discussion in the class about the feelings of anxiety and should take measures to reduce the sense of competition among them (Tanveer, 2007).

7) To give language learners a feeling of success and satisfaction when using English, language teachers should avoid activities that enhance early frustration. They can instead start with simple step by step lessons so that learners can feel satisfied and relaxed when participate in language classes for the first time.

8) It is also recommended that teachers should confront students' erroneous and irrational beliefs by cultivating in them "reasonable commitments for successful language learning" (Horwitz, 1988: cited in Onwuegbuzie et al. 1999). More importantly, students should be guided as to how to direct their attention away from self-centred worries when they are speaking a second/foreign language (1999).

9) Familiarity with the culture and ethnic background of the language learners and an awareness of their previous language learning experiences can also assist language teachers to understand and decode anxiety-related behaviours in some learners. Teachers should specifically make the effort to create a sense of friendship and cooperation among the students. This will help them to speak more confidently and with less anxiety in the class (Tanveer, 2007).

10) Finally, language teachers need some specific in service training courses on general psychology including language anxiety in order to deal with the stress and anxiety in their classes. Finally, Hauck and Hurd (2005) offered a list of eleven strategies to deal with language anxiety. The strategies were:

   1. Use positive self-talk (e.g. I can do it; it doesn't matter if I make mistakes; others make mistakes).
   2. Actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings or trying to speak, even though I might make some mistakes.
3. Imagine that when I am speaking in front of others, it is just a friendly informal chat
4. Tell myself when I speak that it won't take long
5. Give myself a reward or treat when I do well
6. Be aware of physical signs of stress that might affect my language learning
7. Write down my feelings in a day or notebook
8. Share my worries with other students
9. Let my tutor know that I am anxious
10. Use relaxation techniques e.g. deep breathing, consciously speaking more slowly, etc.

CONCLUSION

Almost all research subjects acknowledged that people feel anxious and nervous while speaking English in front of others. Some ESL/EFL learners even expressed that they feel 'stupid' when they cannot speak English well and others maintained that they try to skip or escape the situations, which demand speaking in front of others, either in the classroom or outside of the classroom. What seems to distinguish speaking is the public nature of the skill; this poses a threat to peoples’ self-concept, self-identity, and ego, which they have formed in their first language as reasonable and intelligent individuals (Horwitz et al., 1986). Every factor or situation that creates possibilities or enhances the chances of exposing their deficiencies and language imperfections in front of others is likely to cause language anxiety for ESL/EFL learners. This situation could be either classroom interaction in the form of open class forum, group participation or class presentation, or giving a short talk in any public event is likely to challenge learners’ communicative abilities. What makes a foreign language classroom a highly anxiety-evoking place is its evaluative nature: evaluation by the teachers, peers, and by a learners’ own ‘self’, accompanied by high expectations and beliefs about L2/FL learning. It was found that the feelings of anxiety become more threatening when the language instructors’ manner of error correction is rigid and humiliating and when they consider language class a performance rather than a learning place. Anxiety has also been found to be exacerbated by students’ feeling of low proficiency or lack of confidence in general linguistic knowledge, the evidence of which students do not want to display. The subjects expressed many problems and difficulties in learning English language, like grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, English word-class system, modal verbs etc., which were commonly thought to impede the fluency of the ESL/EFL learners and hence, were perceived to be major obstacles in achieving the desired performance goals in English language. Whenever the learners anticipate these problems while speaking English, as elaborated by an ESL/EFL teacher, they get frightened. This lack of success when trying to achieve the expected performance reinforces learners’ lack of confidence in their general linguistic knowledge and results into debilitating level of anxiety in them when they are called upon to fulfil the demand of any communicative situation. A major cause of facing these L2/FL difficulties was found to be the lack of sufficient input and chances of practicing speaking skill (output) in the social contexts where English is not used as an L1. psycholinguistically speaking, when learners’ cogntive processes of using a language (speaking) are not regularized due to lack of practice, either in the classroom or in the society, these difficulties are likely to continue causing trouble for the L2/FL learners. In addition to these psycholinguistic factors, some cultural aspects of English language learning can also contribute to language anxiety for ESL/EFL learners. In their little interaction with the English-speaking interlocutors, the Iranian learners may have a good command of linguistic knowledge (patterns of language, grammar, vocabulary, etc.) but may feel apprehensive to use it because they are not sure of the cultural rules. This uncertainty of the ESL/EFL learners as to when and how much they should talk in an interaction with English speaking people, creates an unequal social or status relationship between them which “disfavours attempts at negotiation” (Wolfson, 1989). That is why ESL/EFL learners feel anxiousness or stress in intercultural communication, in situations where they feel inferior to the target language speakers, both in terms of cultural awareness and linguistic competencies. Furthermore, they may feel anxiety in speaking English because of the fear that they may lose their positive self-image or self-identity they have formed in their first language. However, for effective alleviation of language anxiety, the comparison of the results of this study with those of the past studies suggests that there do not seem to be any specific remedies for language anxiety. The strategies proposed in this study and similar research projects, as well as recommended by the researchers and theorists, could “certainly work as prescription for anxiety but it might as easily be advice on ‘what good teachers should routinely do’ (Oxford, 1999: cited in Jones, 2004). All such advice is excellent but also applicable to students who do not show signs of anxiety; therefore, the advice cannot be other than general (2004). Language anxiety, it can be postulated, may not require any ‘special treatment’ but what it does demand is the careful attitude of the language teachers in order to understand and to effectively diagnose this phenomenon in the learners. Then,
it requires the application of modern approaches that lay emphasis on enhancing learning opportunities in an environment that is conducive to learning.

REFERENCES


