

The impact of anxiety on foreign language learning: an exploration of beliefs and implications from a high school English teacher in China

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Abstract: Motivational theory is particularly significant for language teaching and learning for the many foreign language learners around the world of which approximately one-third experience different levels of foreign language anxiety (FLA). However, regardless of students their own factors, Wang contends that achieving the goal of mastering languages is principally connected with how teachers take care of the emotion of students. Therefore, it is necessary to find ways of reducing students' anxiety and provide students with a relaxed and cheerful classroom environment.

1. Introduction

Having learned and taught English to senior Grade three high school students in China, driven by the need to pass the university entrance exam, I have experienced the impact of this foreign language anxiety (FLA) phenomenon firsthand. The purpose of this essay is therefore to discuss the views on FLA mainly from the perspective of psychology, in addition to language teaching methods.

2. Teacher Beliefs And Fla

Recently, teacher cognition has become an important part of the conceptualization of Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE), not only in the domain of language teaching, but in general education; this relates to the awareness that teachers and their understanding of teaching play a crucial role in shaping classroom practices. Coupled with research from the field of psychology, this suggests that knowledge and beliefs could exert a strong effect on teacher behaviors, thus positioning teacher beliefs as central to understanding teaching. Language teachers' classroom practices are often shaped by a wide range of interaction. Correspondingly, teachers' beliefs and thoughts emerge and change consistently as a significant influential factor to their practices.

FLA is the feeling of apprehension and uneasiness aroused while using a second language, which was first proposed as a separable aspect of language learning by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope. As for the sources of FLA, Young includes low self-esteem and competitiveness; learner beliefs about language learning; instructor beliefs about language teaching; instructor-learner interactions, as a harsh manner of correcting student errors is often cited as anxious-provoking; classroom procedures which center on having to speak foreign language in the class; and finally, language testing. According to the nature of anxiety, Kleinmann divides anxiety into two types, namely, promoting anxiety and impeding anxiety. As the name implies, promoting anxiety is helpful to learners' learning and could stimulate learners' learning motivation, whereas, impeding anxiety has a hindering effect and may reduce learning efficiency.

Additionally, Horwitz categorizes three components of foreign language classroom anxiety into communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Communication apprehension refers to anxiety about interacting with others. Test anxiety is one kind of performance anxiety induced by the fear of doing badly or failing. Fear of negative evaluation is associated with the learner's anticipation that their classmates or teachers will evaluate his or her language ability negatively. Particular to the foreign language anxiety, this may be evident in individuals who usually forget words or phrases just learned or simply refuse to speak and remain silent. Moreover, an extreme degree of anxiety may manifest in obvious physiological signs of sweaty palms, stomach cramps or an accelerated pulse rate. Some serious foreign language anxiety-related behaviors are distortion of sounds or 'freezing up' when called upon to perform. Furthermore, Horwitz clarifies that some anxious behaviors may be related to performance in the specific context of foreign language classroom. For example, students confirm they know the correct answer on the test but write down the wrong one due to nervousness, or they over-study but still without any improvement in grades, which show that there is more detailed interpretive information available as to the source of anxiety in foreign language learning.

3. Affective Filter Hypothesis

The affective filter hypothesis was proposed by Krashen to recognize the impact of anxiety on language learning. Krashen states that when second language learners' anxiety level is high, their affective filter is correspondingly increased, they become less able to take in the available target language messages, and therefore may not progress in their foreign language acquisition. Gardner and MacIntyre claim that FLCA may be the most relative factor to language achievement. Significant negative connections may also be found between FLCA and motivation, course grades, self-esteem and self-confidence of learners.

4. Discussion

4.1 Teacher perspective

As aforementioned, about one-third of foreign language learners experience mild to high levels of FLA, which may result in varying level of negative influence on language learning. Thus, it is necessary to find effective ways to reduce this.

Firstly, from the teacher's perspective, students' foreign language anxiety might be reduced by developing teaching approaches in class, in addition to adjust teachers' beliefs and behaviors.

According to Krashen, the best way to decrease FLA is to make the teaching procedures more interesting that learners forget it is in another language. In order to achieve this goal, instructors could design more games and tailor their activities to the affective needs of the learner. Young suggests that communicative language teaching method (CLT) could effectively reduce FLA.

Teachers, as theory suggests, should also assess their error correction approach as well as their attitudes toward students. These strategies would also help to overcome aspects of classroom anxiety identified by Horwitz, namely, fear of teachers and classmates' negative evaluation, leading students to feel more at ease when the instructor's manner of correction is more friendly supportive, rather than delivered in an authoritative way.

4.2 Student perspective

From the student's perspective, it is often suggest to students that if a new lesson is going to be taught next day, they would be wise to preview it in advance, so that they may not feel as nervous and anxious about being unable to keep up with the teacher. Additionally, students are often advised to communicate their feelings with their peers, because they will not feel as pressured when communicating with their classmates and might better understand each other compared with the teacher. Thus, stress might be relieved. This supports Kondo and Ying's theory that, learners might use some cognitive and behavioral strategies to regulate their emotions and attitudes. Furthermore, it is found that many students might give themselves some positive psychological hints in the form of positive self-talk when they are nervous. For example, at the beginning of exams, they might whisper 'I can do it' to encourage themselves. Many students reported that this measure increased their confidence and reduced their anxiety.

However, with respect to self-regulation, despite many studies focusing either on different learning environments, or on specific domains of language leaning such as vocabulary and listening, Guo argue that how learners apply these various self-regulatory strategies within their broad self-regulatory process to cope with specific negative affective arousal, such as FLA, still remains largely unexplored and unclear.

5. Conclusion

Although many Chinese and overseas scholars have conducted a lot of theoretical and empirical research on foreign language anxiety, as Ellis notes, these current investigative approaches also have their limitations. For example, these studies are all through self-investigation and do not apply some scientific methods such as somatic response methods that could reflect the psychological changes by measuring the degree of sweat on people's fingertips, which may provide more accurate data. Further, the survey results vary due to the different survey tools, the ways of using survey tools and the age of the subjects. Moreover, many studies on language anxiety are carried out in the context of second language, rather than in the real foreign language learning environment such as in China, thus, these problems remain unresolved. Therefore, as for different research aspects, more accurate and targeted survey tools should be developed in order to ensure more authentic, effective and robust first-hand data so the results might be more guaranteed. Given that language anxiety may have a serious adverse effect on language learning, thus there emerges a pressing need to develop anxiety-reducing solutions and strategies. Moreover, individual case studies using observation and

student and teacher self-report, might offer a more in-depth analysis of real-time FLA experiences. This might add greater depth of insight into the field of FLA and thus, provide further solutions for its future reduction.

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