

Causes, Manifestations, and Implications of Language Anxiety

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Review of Language Anxiety

In previous years, language anxiety was viewed as a manifestation of generalized anxiety, but in recent years language anxiety has been viewed as a complex phenomenon that is separate and distinct from other types of anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), affecting students in various ways, mainly affectively and cognitively. While there are many factors that contribute to a student's foreign language experience, anxiety has been generally agreed upon as being one of the most important predictors of foreign language achievement manifesting itself in both positive and negative ways, either to the benefit of students or to their detriment (Bailey, Dailey, & Onwuegbuzie, 1999; Coryell & Clark, 2009; Ewald, 2007; Marcos-Llinás & Garau, 2009; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999; Saito, Garza, & Horwitz, 1999; Tallon, 2009). Research also suggests that language anxiety can affect the full spectrum of language learners (secondary, heritage, and adult) at all language levels (beginner, intermediate, and advanced), when expected to perform language tasks specific to speaking and listening, but also to reading (Horwitz et al., 1986; Saito et al., 1999). The goal of this review of the literature is to provide insight into what is known about language anxiety in a general sense and what can be done pedagogically to improve students' language experience in order to lower anxiety. Although much of the research refers to Spanish, other languages have also been used.

Definitions of language anxiety

Foreign language anxiety, as defined by MacIntyre (1999), is "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (p. 27). Due to the fact that even heritage speakers often experience language anxiety, a broader definition states that "language learning anxiety" is the "tendency to experience an anxious response during language learning interactions" (Coryell & Clark, 2009, p.484). Horwitz et al. (1986), who has made language anxiety a primary focus of her research and to whom the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) is accredited, add that language anxiety is "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language process" (p. 128) rather than anxiety that simply transfers from one area of learning to another.

Instrument used for language anxiety research

In order to gauge the student levels of language anxiety, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) has been used in the majority of the research involving anxiety. It is an instrument that was designed by Horwitz and contains 33 statements that are assessed on a 5 point scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree). Assessment statement topics include communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative criticism or evaluation in the language classroom (Marcos-Llinás & Garau, 2009). This scale has been used in many studies to test student levels of anxiety, particularly in reference to speaking, and was used to conduct much of the research mentioned throughout this review, in addition to other scales.

Causes of and students that typically experience language anxiety

Qualitative and quantitative research both reveal that language anxiety has most commonly been associated with speaking activities, (Horwitz et al., 1986) but also extend to both listening (Vogely, 1998) and reading activities (Saito et al., 1999). In regards to specific speaking activities that usually create language anxiety, Young (1990) and Frantzen and Magnan (2005) compiled a similar list of anxiety inducing language activities according to student response, some of which include: spontaneous role play in front of the class, presenting a dialogue in front of the class, writing on the board, oral presentations and skits, speaking in any way in front of the class, and oral exams. Young (1991) in a later study adds that the greatest source of anxiety for students in the language classroom is the face-to-face interaction and evaluation that often occurs with peers and instructor and that all language anxiety can usually be associated in some way with the learner, the instructor, and/or the instructional practice. Although most research concurs with what has been mentioned, there are other reported causes of anxiety. In a study involving beginning, intermediate and advanced students of Spanish, Marcos-Llinás and Garau (2009) discovered, in addition to oral practice, that “fear of making mistakes or of being laughed at, pursuing high expectations, showing low self-esteem, or failing the language class” are also common feelings that typically cause or contribute to high levels of anxiety (p. 104).

As previously mentioned, language anxiety can affect any language learner at any language level. More specifically, researchers such as Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999), agree that students who tend to have the highest levels of language anxiety also tend to have at least one of the following characteristics: no experience with high school language courses, older, high academic achievers, never visited a foreign country, lower expectations in regards to grades in their language course, negative perception of their overall academic competence, or low self-esteem.

Although many studies have shown to have commonalities in their findings, some have produced different results in regards to language anxiety issues in beginning, intermediate, and advanced language learners respectively. Beginning and nonheritage speakers tend to feel more anxiety when they are presented with the idea that there is “one right way” to speak a language and that learning a language is about precision, perfection, and performance (Coryell & Clark, 2009). They also described their language classes as being difficult. In Tallon’s (2009) study nonheritage speakers tested lower on the FLCAS in all areas but in areas of phonetics and pronunciation, in which the heritage speakers.

Other studies focusing on advanced language speakers share other results. Research conducted by Ewald (2007) and Marcos-Llinás and Garau (2009) concludes that there is a direct correlation between the level of the language course and the level of language anxiety experienced: the higher the language level, the higher the anxiety. These advanced and heritage speakers often experience higher levels of anxiety in comparison to beginners, not so much due to the difficulty of the course, but because they often feel more pressure to do well and are also more concerned about their relationships with peers and instructors because they feel that they have more to lose by not performing well (Marcos-Llinás & Garau, 2009). The level of comfort that they feel in the class and the confidence they experience also play a big part in their overall experience (Ewald, 2007). In contrast to the beginners in regards to “one right way” to speak the language, advanced and heritage speakers often felt increased anxiety when expected to use the formal register of Spanish or when they felt that their dialect wasn’t the “right” one (Coryell & Clark, 2009). The increase of anxiety among more advanced speakers of Spanish, however, can’t be looked at entirely as a negative factor affecting their performance because studies also show that the higher the language level, the higher the course grade (Marcos-Llinás & Garau, 2009), making it not always a factor directly associated with poor course achievement.

Other factors mentioned that cause language anxiety to increase and are not level-related include: the higher the language anxiety level according to the FLCAS the higher the level of reading anxiety, the perception of reading difficulty increases the level of anxiety (Saito et al., 1999), the lack of pre-listening activities (activating background knowledge, visual support) tend to cause anxiety (Vogely, 1998), and students who are academically irresponsible and who prefer to learn alone tend to have higher levels of foreign language anxiety (Bailey et al., 1999).

Manifestations of language anxiety

Now that we have looked at many of the causes of language anxiety, it is important to mention that what students typically experience as language anxiety increases. Although many of the manifestations that will be mentioned are

considered to be negative reactions, the reader should also take note that there are reported positive manifestations such as increased motivation despite high anxiety (Coryell & Clark, 2009). Negative manifestations include “freezing up” and concentration difficulties, lack of comprehension, errors (Young, 1991), worry and dread (Ewald, 2007), frustration (Coryell & Clark, 2009), fear, panic, reticence and self-consciousness (Horwitz et al., 1986), to name a few. Horwitz et al. (1986) also have found that students who experience high anxiety tend to not even attempt to participate and often avoid use of the target language entirely.

Although increased anxiety does not entirely correlate with low course achievement among all language learners, there are many students who, when placed in a language experience, worry so much that their performance (MacIntyre, 1995) and even their acquisition are impeded (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999) describe the cognitive process that these students encounter in an anxious learning environment:

A demand to answer a question in a second language class may cause a student to become anxious; anxiety leads to worry and rumination. Cognitive performance is diminished because of the divided attention and therefore performance suffers, leading to negative self-evaluations and more self-deprecating cognition which further impairs performance and so on. For some students, this is a frequent course of events, and anxiety becomes reliably associated with any situation involving the second language. Once established, this association leads students to become anxious at the prospect of second language learning or communication. (p. 92)

Pedagogical Implications

Most language teachers are probably aware that they have students who experience anxiety in their classrooms. This anxiety, as previously mentioned, can at times cause so much worry and frustration that students actually keep themselves from succeeding. For this reason, language instructors should handle these situations with care. The majority of published research tends to mention pedagogical implications for adapting teaching to meet the needs of high-anxiety students. Many suggestions have been made, but almost all researchers and students suggest that the instructor is the single most important factor and the key to creating a positive language-learning environment (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005). Specifically instructors should instigate discussion about language learning and the benefits of making mistakes. Also, instructors could forewarn students of some things they might experience in a language classroom while at the same time focusing on the positive aspects of language learning so that students in turn will have positive attitudes (Ewald, 2007; Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; Saito et al., 1999; Tallon, 2009; Vogely, 1998; Young 1991). By having these open discussions,

instructors and students can be reassured knowing that they are all working towards the same goals in an positive learning atmosphere that they have all worked to create.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, language anxiety is a phenomenon that deserves further study (Horwitz et al., 1986). The majority of the studies referenced involved the participation of university language students from a variety of levels and studying a variety of languages. Most of the research presented has examined language anxiety as experienced by foreign/second language students. Further research would be useful that examines the effects of language anxiety on heritage speakers, particularly of Spanish, but at the secondary level.

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