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The Causes and Effects of Language Learning Anxiety

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ANNOTATION

This study presents a review of the literature on foreign language anxiety. The paper aims to identify the main causes of foreign language anxiety and its effects on learners' ability to learn foreign languages.

KEYWORDS: language learning anxiety, second language acquisition, performance, causes, effects, progress, success, stress, impact, emotions, feelings.

Introduction

Foreign language acquisition is considered a challenging process for many learners. Learning a foreign language may be affected by a number of linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Interestingly, people may achieve different foreign language achievements even if they learn the language at the same time and under the same conditions. Different success in the target language may be caused by learners' individual differences such as age, intelligence, language anxiety, aptitude, learning strategies and styles, motivation, willingness to communicate, etc. According to many language researchers, language learning anxiety is one of the most affective barriers that learners face during the process of second language acquisition (Alrabai, 2014; Wu, 2010).

Language anxiety, according to Horwitz (2001), is a non-linguistic factor that has a detrimental impact on the psychology of learners (p. 114). When a timid student delivers a short talk in front of the entire class, for example, he or she may feel uncomfortable and nervous. As a result, they may fail performance because of their anxiety, which prevents them from doing well. By contrast, confident and calm students will do better since they are not affected by language anxiety (Woodrow, 2006).

Horwitz and Cope (1986) identified that anxious students had difficulties speaking and understanding a target language message in a foreign language classroom. Several studies on foreign language anxiety discovered that language learners who experience foreign language anxiety find it difficult to enjoy their studies, resulting in poor performance and accomplishment (MacIntyre, 1999; Riasati, 2011). Therefore, learners who have English speaking anxiety face difficulties when they are required to speak even after learning the language for a long time. When communicative assessments are utilized, Krashen (1982) claims that anxiety has a direct connection to second language performance. It is self-evident that for the vast majority of learners, trying to communicate in English is similar to confronting a ghost in the night. They often regard achieving English competence as an

unattainable task. Nonetheless, the question of whether anxiety is helpful or not remains debatable because some research has identified anxiety as beneficial. Chastain (1975), for example, finds a correlation between helpful anxiety and excellent scores in language lessons among students enrolled in French, German, and Spanish programs.

Previous studies on foreign language anxiety have consistently revealed that anxiety can impede second/foreign language attainment and performance. More studies are needed since anxiety generates significant issues for EFL learners, which can affect learners' performance and accomplishment (Elaldi, 2006).

Definition of anxiety and its classification.

Before dealing with foreign language anxiety, we should have a clear understanding of what anxiety is. Anxiety is feeling worried about something that is about to happen, or which might happen in the near future. Anxiety is "an unpleasant emotional state of condition which is characterized by subjective feelings or tension, apprehension and worry, and by activation or arousal of the autonomic nervous system that accompanies these feelings" (Spielberger, 1972, p. 482). In regard to this, we can understand that anxiety is the physical reaction of the human organism to a particular stimulus. From time to time, each of us comes across stressful situations which make us feel anxious.

Scovel (1978) defined anxiety as "apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object" (p. 34). Other psychologists, on the other hand, do not support the view that anxiety is associated with fear. They claim that a definition of anxiety is distinct from that of fear. It is believed that fear takes the body away from danger, whereas anxiety keeps the human body closer to danger or prevents it from getting into danger "(Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008).

From the psychological point of view, anxiety has been divided into three types: trait, state, and situation-specific anxieties. Trait anxiety is experienced by people who tend to feel anxious in any situation. People with this kind of anxiety have "a more permanent predisposition to be anxious" (Scovel, 1987). State anxiety refers to the anxiety individuals come across from time to time. It is a transient, moment-to-moment experience of anxiety that is related to specific events or situations (Dornyei, 2005; Ehrman, 1996; Ellis, 1994). The last type of anxiety is situation-specific anxiety that occurs only in a certain situation. People with situation-specific anxiety may feel anxious in one situation, but can be completely calm and confident in others. Situation-specific anxiety is triggered by a particular type of situation or event, such as public speaking (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). (MacIntyre P. &, 1994).

Foreign language anxiety

Language anxiety is a situation-specific anxiety experienced in foreign language acquisition. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) define language anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behavior related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning experience" (p.128). Anxiety, according to MacIntyre (1999), is an unpleasant emotion and a sense of uneasiness while learning a foreign/second language. This is the factor that may prevent learners from achieving success in learning a foreign language. MacIntyre & Gardner (1991) point out that for some students learning a foreign language is more stressful than any other class. If learners are constantly experiencing stress while using the target language in the classroom, they will not be able to make progress in their foreign language acquisition.

MacIntyre & Gardner (1991), having analyzed the negative impact of anxiety on language learning, came to the conclusion that students who suffer from anxiety in the classroom are less willing to take part in speaking activities and tend to avoid complex grammatical structures and vocabulary. As a result, they face difficulties

expressing their thoughts, understanding the target language, as well as using a range of vocabulary. This negative development will lead to low performance and, consequently, low achievements.

Causes of foreign language anxiety

Researchers have identified a number of variables that cause anxiety in language learning classrooms. According to Howitz et al. (1986), there are three causes contributing to foreign language anxiety in terms of performance: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension is related to the type of fear learners experience during oral expression. McCroskey (1978) believes communication apprehension causes anxiety during actual or planned communication with others. Foreign language anxiety can be caused by test anxiety, which is defined by Howitz et al. (1986) as "a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure" (p. 127). Students may have anxiety about the test due to poor performance during a test exam in the past. Their negative thoughts result in distraction, which affects their performance and leads to low achievements. Fear of failure is defined as "an apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation of negative evaluation from others" (Horwitz et al. 1986, p127). At first glance, it may appear to be similar to test anxiety, but fear of failure is more about a student's expectation of not receiving approval from others. Students' desire to impress everyone seems unattainable to them and, subsequently, results in being passive in the classroom. Aida (1994) supports this point of view and says that students avoid participating in activities because of their fear of being criticized.

In addition to all causes mentioned above, there are other factors which have no less influence on foreign language acquisition. Bailey (1983) points out that competitiveness, self-esteem, and students' relationships with their teachers can also contribute to anxiety in the classroom. With regard to competitiveness, it is worth noticing that it may be one of the main causes of anxiety in language acquisition. Ni (2012), taking into account all the reasons for this issue, suggests that learners may feel anxious due to their willingness to compete with each other. He claims that students are inclined to think they are less competent than other students when they compare themselves with them (p. 151). Undoubtedly, confidence plays an important role in this question, because if students are insecure about their language competence, they may be less willing to participate in the classroom. In regard to this, Edinne (2013) says that "a learner may experience anxiety because of a lack of skills and instruction, the ability to interact in an appropriate manner inside and outside the classroom" (p. 25). Besides that, the learning environment and the teacher may also be the main factors causing students to feel anxious during the lesson. For example, the way teachers call students in the classroom may trigger a feeling of anxiety among students. Liu and Jackson (2008) believe that teachers' correction of learners' errors in front of classmates or other teachers is another major source of foreign language anxiety.

Effects of foreign language anxiety

A number of studies have proved that language anxiety has detrimental effects on language learning. For example, Horwitz (2001) points out that if learners are affected by a high level of foreign language, they are more likely not to achieve high academic achievements. According to some other researchers, foreign language anxiety courses cause students to drop out of their studies. Bailey (2003) claims that students who suffer from high levels of anxiety are more likely to drop out of their studies compared to students with low levels of anxiety. According to Price (1991), the less harmful effect of language anxiety is students' reluctance to speak to others. Horwitz et al. (2010) say this says that anxious learners are less likely to communicate in the target language. The fourth negative impact of language anxiety is the "socio-affective filter," which

prevents foreign language input from entering the student's mental processing system. Filter, according to Krashens (1985), blocks the information and doesn't allow students to receive it. It is similar to the situation when anxious learners may struggle to grasp some information quickly due to the fact that their processing ability is disrupted by their anxiety. Horwitz et al. (2010) believe that students' motivation and attitude may be negatively affected by their anxiety. Students may lose their enthusiasm for learning process language and become unmotivated to learn a foreign language.

People hold different opinions regarding whether foreign language anxiety is beneficial or detrimental. Some research supports the view that learning anxiety can lead to some positive development. For example, Scovel (1978) suggests that anxiety can help language learners to keep them alert. Similarly, Hadley (1992) says that "a certain amount of anxiety is useful for language learners". Handley (1992) believes that language anxiety can encourage the use of some performance-improving approaches which can help language learners achieve attainments in foreign language acquisition.

Conclusion

Anxiety is one of the affective factors that affect students' academic performance, according to this literature review. High levels of foreign language anxiety are a challenging issue that undermines students' language learning process. To think deeply about this issue, the consequences of failing, speaking in front of an audience, and feeling uneasiness during language tests are the main factors that cause students to be stressed. The study also demonstrates that teaching methods and pedagogical practices might be anxiety-provoking factors in foreign language classrooms. However, a certain amount of anxiety can be beneficial in motivating students to achieve success in foreign language acquisition. Researchers should approach this topic methodically and provide a thorough understanding of this issue. A detailed understanding of the reasons for foreign language anxiety might aid in the finding of ways to address this issue. According to this comprehensive review, more research is needed to support past findings on foreign language anxiety.

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