

THE EFFECT OF LANGUAGE ANXIETY IN THE CLASSROOM

Oleh

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate factors contributing to anxiety. The study attempts to investigate whether language anxiety gives positive or negative impacts to language learners. It also tries to see how different educational system influences learner's belief in learning a language. The findings indicate that the subject experienced anxiety in classroom particularly when she was asked to do oral presentation in the classroom. This was because she grew up in different language background and educational system. Although the subject was anxious when speaking in front of the class, she could manage her anxiety by preparing the presentation well.

Introduction

Language anxiety has become a major factor effecting learners in learning a foreign/second language in the classroom. It may bring positive and negative effect to language learner depending on how learner deals with it. A number of research on language anxiety has been conducted from language specialist's perspective (Young, 1992) and from teacher's perspective (Ohata, 2005), however these findings were still mixed and confusing (Scovel, 1991). In the past, several studies were conducted to investigate the effect of language anxiety on foreign language learner (Young, 1991; Kleinmann, 1977; Steinberg, 1982; Madsen, 1982; Ely, 1986 as cited in Price, 1991). Similarly, Price (1991) investigated language anxiety and interviewed some highly anxious students; however the results were not really significant because the subjects were perfectionist students. In addition, the research was conducted in a country with similar educational system background.

It is assumed that the educational system also impacts language anxiety in the classroom. This educational

system changes student's belief that language, especially English is more stressful than what learners have already assumed. This report shall investigate how anxiety impacts upon a learner's performance and will investigate what factors contribute to the anxiety. This report is also going to see how different educational system influences learner's belief in language learning.

Literature Review

Definition of language anxiety

Language anxiety is defined in various terms. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994, p. 284) define language anxiety as "feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language context, including speaking, listening, and learning". Language anxiety is also called communication apprehension. According to Daly (1991), communication apprehension is "the fear or anxiety an individual feels about orally communicating" (p.3). Anxiety is also described by other psychologist as a state of apprehension as a vague fear that is related with an object indirectly

(Hilgard, Atkinson & Atkinson, 1971 as cited in Scovel, 1991).

Horwitz and Young (1991, p.1) identify language anxiety in two approaches: 1) language anxiety may be viewed as a manifestation of other more general types of anxiety (e.g. test anxiety); 2) language anxiety may be seen as a distinctive form of anxiety expressed in response to language learning. These two approaches show that anxiety makes someone nervous in communicating.

The first approach views that language anxiety as a manifestation of other types of anxiety such as test anxiety and communication apprehension in language learning performances. Ohata (2005) assumes that this approach benefits a research when defining language anxiety itself. This anxiety may occur in specific situation such as in classroom context.

The second approach views language anxiety as a distinctive form of anxiety. It makes someone nervous in learning a language. MacIntyre (1999, p.27 as cited in Ohata, 2005) defines language anxiety as worry and as negative emotional reactions aroused when learning a second language. For language learners, the worst thing that might happen is that they become stress.

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1991, p. 30) divide anxiety into categories, namely: 1) communication apprehension; 2) test anxiety; 3) fear of negative evaluation. They argue that communication apprehension is a kind of shyness followed by fear or anxiety in communicating. As cited in McCroskey (1977), they also viewed that communication apprehension is associated with foreign language anxiety. This fear is quite often found in language classrooms where the students participate less in class especially in oral presentation (Horwitz *et al*, 1991)

Test anxiety refers to evaluation in language learning. Horwitz *et al* (1991) quoted Gordon & Sarason (1955) and Sarason (1980)'s definition of test anxiety is a type of performance result from a fear of failure. Horwitz *et al* (1991) argued that the students sometimes put unrealistic demand on themselves especially in oral test performance. It seems that the students press themselves to get high score on the test; but as a result they may perform conversely.

The last category of anxiety is fear of negative evaluation. According to Watson & Friend (1969 as cited in Horwitz *et al*, 1991), fear of negative evaluation refers to apprehension about other's evaluation, avoidance of evaluative situation, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively. Although this type is similar to test anxiety, Horwitz *et al* (1991) argue that it does not only exist in test situation but also in social context such as interview.

Factors contribute language anxiety in the classroom

It has been agreed that language anxiety provokes an important role in language learning. Although teachers and learners are aware of its existence in language learning, they should notice where it comes from – it can be from the teacher, the student or the learning condition. Young (1991, p. 427) identifies six sources of language anxiety, namely: 1) personal and interpersonal anxieties; 2) learner beliefs about language learning; 3) instructor beliefs about language teaching; 4) instructor-learner interactions; 5) classroom procedures; and 6) language testing. These sources should be recognized by the teacher in order to response language anxiety in the class.

Personal and interpersonal matters are significant sources in language anxiety. Low self-esteem

and competitiveness, as explained by Young (1991), are the two significant causes of language anxiety in this area. Similarly, Bailey (1983, as cited in Young, 1991) argues that learners' competitiveness among their friends may lead to anxiety. Ellis (1994) adds that when learner cannot achieve high performance among their friends, the learner will lose their face in the target language. Therefore, these phenomena may be a source of problem for students in expressing their ideas in front of others.

Learner beliefs about language learning are another factor contributing language anxiety. For example, learners believe that talking to native speaker will help them learn a language. Others also believe that speaking is the first priority when someone learns a foreign/second language. When this belief is unrealistic and quite difficult to achieve, Young (1991) argues that language learners may become anxious. It is perhaps true that when student faces this problem, he will end up frustrated.

Instructor beliefs about language teaching are also sources of language anxiety. It is believed that teacher's role in the class is considered as corrector when students make a mistake, as teacher who does most talking in a class, rather than as facilitator. According to Young (1991), these images, however, may contribute language anxiety to learners. However, this is unlikely to happen if the teacher tries to change the principle of teaching.

Instructor-learner interactions are further causes of language anxiety. Some studies have been conducted to investigate how these interactions impact on learner's performance. Hadley suggests that the teacher should avoid putting down students on the spot or focusing on their errors directly

when students make a mistake (Young, 1992). The teacher should pay attention on "the manner of error correction" (Young, 1991, p. 429) in order to reduce anxiety. This might be helpful for learner to express his idea precisely without thinking of being corrected when he is speaking.

Furthermore, anxiety is associated with classroom procedures. Many scholars report that speaking in front of the audience is most stressful and fearful. Language specialist such as Krashen, Rardin, Terrel and Omaggio Hadley acknowledge that students experience more anxiety over speaking in the foreign language (Young, 1992). This could happen when the teacher focus on oral presentation. Students who do not like to perform in front of the class to speak will be more uncomfortable in the class.

Anxiety can stem from language testing, including both test items and the testing situation. Bailey (1983, as cited in Skehan, 1989) noted that language testing is one of the sources of anxiety. According to Young (1991), students also feel anxiety when they spend hours only to find that their tests assess different items from what they have already learned. Furthermore, Daly (1991) states that the learner experiences fear when the test situation is ambiguous, novel or highly evaluative. It is clear that unfamiliar tests may also produce anxiety to the learner.

Effect of language anxiety to language learning

The effect of language anxiety for the language learner is still debatable. While some studies suggest that the relationship between anxiety and foreign/second language performance exists (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Young, 1992; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991), other findings suggest that there is no

relationship between anxiety and the language learner's performance (Bachman, 1976; Brewster, 1975; Pimsleur, 1962; Westcott, 1973 as cited in Young, 1991). Although these findings are confusing and mixed results (Scovel, 1991), it is believed that language anxiety impact on language learning.

Language anxiety may lead to positive and negative effect on learner's performance. Some learners benefit from language anxiety, however some learners tend to avoid anxiety in the classroom. Based on the result of research done by Kleimann (1977, as cited in Scovel, 1991) on the English output of Arabic and Spanish students using variety of tests, it is assumed that "facilitating anxiety would encourage learners to employ the very English structures that their native language group would tend to avoid" (p. 18).

A negative effect of anxiety can be seen from the result of study done by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) using focused essay technique to students. It was noted that anxious students who wrote an essay showed less confidence in producing words compared to relaxed students. This study suggests that anxiety relates to a learner's self confidence in using language skills, therefore the learner avoids any learning task which causes the learner frustration. Scovel (1991) then concluded that

... facilitating anxiety motivates the learner to "fight" the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approach behaviour. Debilitating anxiety, in contrast, motivates the learner to "flee" the new learning task; it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behaviour (p. 22).

Method

Participants

One Macquarie university student agreed to participate in the study. The subject is female and has studied four languages at school but Japanese and English are spoken actively. The subject's first language is Japanese while English is her second language.

Procedures

The first thing to do was conducting interview to find out whether the subject experienced anxiety or not. The subject was asked several questions and the conversation was recorded. The interview, which took about 15 minutes, consists of two parts. The first part of the interview was about learner's background and the second part was more specific, related to learner's experience in anxiety. The specific questions given to the subject were:

1. Can you tell me something about how you felt during your English classes?
2. Did you experience an equal amount of anxiety in all four skill areas?
3. How did you manifest your anxiety in a classroom?
4. Did anxiety affect your performance?
5. Do you have any idea as to how language classes might be made less stressful?
6. Did your teacher notice when you are anxiety?
7. What did your teacher do to minimize your anxiety in language classes?

Although there were many questions asked to the subject, there were 7 questions related to the topic. Question 1, 5 were adapted from similar interview done by Price (1991, 103).

Data Analysis

Finally, analysis of the interviews was conducted by listening and transcribing recorded interview.

Results and Discussion

Interview Results

1). Can you tell me something about how you felt during your English classes?

The subject grew up in Japan in which educational system is different from Australia. When the participant learned English in Japan, she had no problem at all in a classroom. The subject should not be active because she had to read, wrote in English and memorized words a lot. While in Australia where the educational system is completely different from Japan, she should be active in the classroom. The subject felt nervous when she was asked to give presentation in front of other students. This experience is in line with what some language specialists (Young, 1991; Young, 1992; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) assumed. Ommagio Hadley noted that students experience anxiety when they are asked to perform in front of the others in the class, especially in a whole group (Young, 1992).

2). Did you experience an equal amount of anxiety in all four skill areas?

The participant experienced different amounts of anxiety in language skills. She was more anxious in speaking than writing and reading skills. This is because she had no experience in giving presentations in front of many people. As many linguists note, oral performance is probably the most obvious cause of anxiety (Young, 1992; Price, 1991; Young, 1991). A recent study conducted by Ohata (2005, p. 145) by interviewing 7 experienced ESL/EFL teachers showed that the level of

anxiety for language skills vary depending on the individual student differences, for instance student's personality traits, level of L2 proficiency or learning style. For example, shy students may find stressful in oral performance and prefer to have independent learning. In contrast, students who are active find it interesting and useful when they are called upon for oral performance in front of the class.

Anxiety has also been correlated with listening skill. According to Lalonde, Moorcroft, and Evers (1987, as cited in MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991), anxiety has influenced listening comprehension negatively. This finding is also in line with what the participant experienced in listening. She explained that it was quite difficult to understand when English native speakers are speaking.

3). How did you manifest you anxiety in a classroom?

In relation to question 3, the participant was not quite sure whether she had physical or psychological symptoms. However, she stated that when she is nervous she will keep silent for a moment then continue speaking. Rardin noted that anxious learners will express their anxiety clearly. "The most obvious forms are distortion of the sound, an ability to reproduce the intonation and rhythm of the language, a 'freezing up' when called on to perform, forgetting of words or phrases 'just learned', or simply refusing to speak and remaining in silence" (Young, 1992, p. 164). Keeping silent in a while in a short period usually happens when students are anxious or nervous in oral performance. This behaviour is called disaffiliative behaviour (Leary, 1982 as cited in Young, 1991).

In participant's experience when she gave presentation in class,

she tended to avoid eye contact with audience. This is probably because she was nervous when speaking in front of a whole group in a class. This behaviour (Ohata, 2005, p. 146) can be noticed by teachers if the student signals anxious feelings such as playing their hair, avoiding eye contact with the teacher, trembling, etc. However, many teachers said that it would be difficult for them to recognise anxious feelings of their students unless their anxieties were expressed obviously (Ohata, 2005, p. 146).

4). Did anxiety affect your performance?

From the result of presentation the participant achieved, we can see that anxiety affects the participant performance specifically in speaking. Her score in speaking was higher compared to other skills e.g. writing and reading. Furthermore, her teacher also gave comment that she should pay attention on eye contact and be confident. Several studies report that there is a link between anxiety and self perception e.g. self confidence (Skehan, 1989). Research results found that self perceptions can have effect on behaviour (Russel, 1987, as cited in MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Therefore, it is obvious that the participant's experience is in line with what previous studies have done. Therefore, anxiety affects learner's oral performance significantly.

5). Do you have any idea as to how language classes might be made less stressful?

To make a class less stressful, the participant suggests three points, namely, a friendly classroom atmosphere, topic of the lesson, and teacher-student interaction. She believes that a classroom with a friendly atmosphere can reduce student

anxiety in a class. What the subject felt probably related to so called personal and interpersonal anxiety (Young, 1991). To overcome this problem, Foss and Reitzel (1991) offer several techniques (p.135-136). They recommend that the teacher asks the students to use rational emotive therapy. The teacher asks the students to verbalize any fears and then write them down on the board. Another technique they offered is to use an anxiety graph. Students are asked to chart their level of anxiety to show that not every stage of an oral interaction produces an equal amount of anxiety. Similarly, Ohata (2005) offers ways to create a comfortable classroom environment by providing students fun activities such as games; letting students to laugh by telling jokes; and playing some background music (p. 147).

The second point is the lesson topic. Terrell suggests that the teacher tries to focus on topics the student is interested in and knows something about (Young, 1992, p. 166). It does not always mean the teacher will let the students to choose what topic interests them, but Terrell assumes that choosing a topic relevant to the learner's own experience will lower learner's anxiety.

The last point that the subject points out is teacher-student interaction. According to Price (1991, p. 107), instructors can reduce learner's anxiety by giving students more positive reinforcement and encouraging them to make mistakes. Similarly, Young's subjects also described certain teacher's characteristics that helped decrease learner's anxiety (Young, 1990 as cited in Young, 1991). They argued that teacher can tell the students that making mistakes is common in learning a language. This perception, at least, help the students reduce their

anxiety and make them comfortable in expressing their ideas. Furthermore, Young (1991) adds that modelling approach is effective in correcting error. In modelling approach, students are not corrected in front of the peers, but it is needed if the students who like to be corrected.

6). Did your teacher notice when you are anxiety?

The participant believes that her instructor noticed that she was anxious in her presentation. This is very interesting because not many teachers know that their students are anxious in a class. Ohata (2005, p. 146) stated that some teachers notice their students are anxious if their students manifest their anxiety in obvious physical symptoms such as trembling, shaky body movement etc., otherwise they will not notice them. Young (1992) give some suggestions to teachers to: a) be sensitive to the signals students provide; b) recognize the behaviours for what they are; c) trust your perception; and d) work to reduce language anxiety.

7). What did your teacher do to minimize your anxiety in language classes?

The instructor suggested the participant prepare notes when she is going to give her presentation. Although the participant realized that she was nervous when she did her presentation in front of the class, it did not make her upset. In contrast, she believed that if she prepared everything by preparing notes and memorized what she was going to say she would be able to give her presentation well. It seems clear that teacher corrections and suggestions will be useful for her to improve her language proficiency skills.

Similarly, Terrell comments on giving correction. Terrell (Young, 1992) argues that the teacher should stop error correction in free conversation (p.166). In other words, the teacher should not interrupt the students while they are speaking. It seems clear that giving correction is a positive way to improve students' skills; however it should be in a correct way. The teacher should be able to use language which does not put the students down – for example, 'You did a good job. It was a good presentation. Keep practicing your English'.

Conclusion

It is clear that language anxiety is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to both notice and assess. Although it affects learner's achievements in language learning positively and negatively, it helps a learner to improve her/his achievement. Some students are more anxious in speaking than using other language skills. However, this problem does not only stem from a learner's belief of language learning. It is believed that the language of an educational system may lead to a learner's anxiety. A learner who has never experienced performing in front of the class will disadvantage from situation where the learner is asked to speak in front of other students. A teacher also plays an important role to reduce learner's anxiety in a class. Teacher-student interaction may help the learner to participate in any task given by the teacher. Finally, it can be concluded that language anxiety does not always associate with low achievement in language learning; rather it is because of factors that influence the learner's behaviour.

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