

A Culture of Caring: Reducing Anxiety and Increasing Engagement in First-Year Foreign Language Courses

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Anyone who has ever taken a foreign language course in school can testify to the fact that it is not always an easy task. One interesting question in the field of Second Language Acquisition is why some learners successfully learn a second language while other learners do not. Several reasons have been posited for this, including individual factors such as cognitive abilities, personality characteristics, aptitude, and affective factors. Three important affective factors are attitudes, motivation, and anxiety. In other words, what the learner brings to the learning situation and how the learner feels can have an impact on what is learned. One of the most important affective variables in learning a foreign language is foreign language anxiety (FLA). The purpose of this paper is to (1) briefly review the sources of foreign language anxiety, and (2) discuss ways to lower students' anxiety in the classroom, which in turn will lead to more student engagement. Although the discussion will focus on the foreign language context, many of the ideas expressed will be helpful in creating a "culture of caring" in any classroom.

Foreign Language Anxiety

With their seminal article "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety," Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) provided a definition of the anxiety specifically associated with language learning. That is, foreign 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 learning process" (128). They identified three related anxieties as components of FLA:

communication apprehension (the fear of communicating with other people), test anxiety (fear of exams, quizzes, and other assignments used to evaluate the students' performance), and fear of negative evaluation (the worry about how others view the speaker). Foreign language anxiety is a situation-specific form of anxiety that does not appear to bear a strong relation to other forms of anxiety; that is, it is related to the language-learning context (Horwitz, 2001).

Why Should We Care about Foreign Language Anxiety?

Foreign Language anxiety is important because it can represent an emotionally and physically uncomfortable experience for some students. If the students are very anxious in class, they are probably not full engaged – or engaged at all. Foreign language anxiety has been found to have potential negative effects on academic achievement (e.g., lower course grades) (Horwitz, 1986; Saito and Samimy, 1996; MacIntyre, Noels and Clément, 1997), cognitive processes (e.g., not being able to produce the language) (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994), the social context (e.g., communicating less) (Kleinmann, 1977; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991a, 1991b; MacIntyre and Charos, 1995; Steinberg and Horwitz, 1986; Mejías, Applbaum, Applbaum and Trotter, 1991), and the reaction for the language learner (e.g., traumatic experiences) (MacIntyre, 1999; Cohen and Norst, 1989; Price, 1991; Phillips, 1990).

Sources of Foreign Language Anxiety

It has been estimated that approximately one-third of students learning a foreign language experience some type of foreign language anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). Research has shown that there are a number of ways that learning a foreign language can cause anxiety for the language learner. The causes can be broken down into three main sources: learner characteristics, teacher characteristics, and classroom procedures.

Learner characteristics that can cause foreign language anxiety include low self-esteem, competitiveness, self-perceived low level of ability, communication apprehension, lack of group membership with peers, and beliefs about language learning.

Bailey (1983) attributed the cause of language anxiety to competitiveness on the part of the learners. She analyzed the diaries of 11 learners and found that they tended to become anxious when they compared themselves with other learners in the class and found themselves less proficient. She noted that as the learners perceived themselves becoming more proficient, and therefore better able to compete, their anxiety decreased.

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) stated that anxious students often cite speaking in the foreign language to be their most anxiety-producing experience. This is in part due to the fact that it is hard to be one's self in the target language (i.e., feelings of uncertainty and threats to the ego due to the unknown element of the second language; cf. Guiora et al., 1972), which can thus trigger anxiety. The foreign language learner is put in the position of communicating something that is meaningful to him/her without having sufficient command of the language to do so. Self-aware language learners are confronted with the probability that people will perceive them differently from the way they perceive themselves. Thus, learners can experience anxiety as a result of fear or experience of "losing oneself" in the target culture. As Oxford (1992) points out, this is closely related to the idea of "culture shock."

Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) looked at the relationship between foreign language anxiety and perfectionism. They found that anxious language learners and perfectionists may have a number of characteristics in common (e.g., higher standards for their English performance, a greater tendency toward procrastination, more worry over the opinions of others, and a higher level of concern over their errors) and that these characteristics have the potential

for making language learning unpleasant as well as less successful for them than for other students.

Most studies on foreign language anxiety are quantitative in nature. From a qualitative perspective, Price (1991) interviewed highly-anxious students to gain insight into the subjective experience of language anxiety. One of the interviewees stated: “I’d rather be in prison camp than speak a foreign language.” In general, the interviews were consistent with the foreign language anxiety construct identified by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). The participants spoke about their test anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation. All of them identified speaking the target language to be the greatest source of anxiety. Just like Young (1990), the interviews conducted by Price emphasized the importance of low self-esteem. Many of her subjects compared themselves to other language learners and believed their language skills to be weaker. In addition, the participants’ responses suggested that perfectionism is another personality trait that can come into play (cf. Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002). According to Price (1991), anxious learners often engage in self-comparison with classmates and peers – a practice which can lead to anxiety.

Student beliefs about language learning can also be associated with anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986; Horwitz, 1988, 1989; Price, 1991; Young, 1991). Students can have unrealistic expectations as to how a person should perform in a foreign language classroom; when those expectations are not met it can lead to negative feelings about one’s intelligence and abilities. Young (1994) listed the following role-related beliefs which have been shown to evoke feelings of anxiety: it is necessary for the teacher to be intimidating at times; the instructor is supposed to correct every single mistake made by the students; group or partner work is not

appropriate because it can get out of control; the teacher should do most of the talking; and the instructor's role is that of a drill sergeant.

In a study of beginning university language learners, Horwitz (1988) found that over a third of the students thought that a foreign language could be learned in two years or less of typical university study (i.e. one hour a day). In addition, many students also believed that learning a second language primarily involved memorizing vocabulary words and grammatical rules. Such erroneous beliefs may lead to disappointment and frustration on the part of the students. Horwitz (1989) found a relationship between several language learning beliefs and levels of foreign language anxiety in university Spanish students. Specifically, as compared with less anxious students, the more anxious learners in this study judged language learning to be relatively difficult and themselves to possess relatively low levels of foreign language aptitude.

Palacios (1998) found that the following student beliefs are associated with anxiety: the feeling that mastering a language is an overwhelming task; the feeling that one needs to go through a translation process in order to communicate in the target language; the difficulty of keeping everything in one's head; and the belief that learning a language is easier at an earlier age. These are all faulty beliefs that may cause the students to have unrealistic expectations about the language learning process, and thus cause some anxiety.

As far as teacher factors, a judgmental teaching attitude (Samimy, 1994) and a harsh manner of teaching (Aida, 1994) are linked to student fear in the classroom. Palacios (1998) found the following characteristics of the teacher to be associated with anxiety: absence of teacher support, unsympathetic personalities, lack of time for personal attention, favoritism, a sense that the class does not provide students with the tools necessary to match up with the teacher's expectations, and the sense of being judged by the teacher or wanting to impress the

teacher. Young (1999) noted that teaching too much grammar or avoiding grammar altogether as well as using speaking activities that put the learner “on the spot” in front of peers without allowing prior preparation are also sources of anxiety for many students. Ando (1999) found that having a native speaker for a teacher can cause anxiety, as the teacher may lack the sensitivity of the learning process or the teacher may be hard to understand in English.

A third source of foreign language anxiety is classroom procedures. Young (1990) compiled a list of classroom activities which are perceived by students as producing anxiety: (1) spontaneous role play in front of the class; (2) speaking in front of the class; (3) oral presentations or skits in front of the class; (4) presenting a prepared dialogue in front of the class; and (5) writing work on the board. Error correction also turned out to play an important role: being negatively evaluated by either the teacher or peers is often associated with anxiety. Palacios (1998) found the following classroom characteristics to be anxiety-producing: demands of oral production, feelings of being put on the spot, the pace of the class, and the element of being evaluated (i.e., fear of negative evaluation).

Koch and Terrell (1991) found that even within classes using the Natural Approach – a language teaching method specifically designed to reduce learners’ anxiety – learners were more comfortable participating in some activities, such as pair-work and personalized discussions, than others. However, they also found great variability in learner reactions to the activities. In almost all cases, any task that was judged “comfortable” by some language learners was also judged “stressful” by others. They conducted a detailed analysis of learners’ emotional reactions to specific types of classroom activities and instructional techniques. Their participants rated oral presentations, skits, and role playing as the most anxiety-producing. Koch and Terrell concluded: “Consequently, activities and instructional techniques should not be thought of as

intrinsically ‘good’ or ‘bad’ but rather ‘useful’ or ‘not recommended’ for certain students at particular levels of language acquisition” (p. 124).

Oxford (1999) emphasized learning and teaching styles as a potential source of language anxiety. If the instructor’s teaching style and a student’s learning style are not compatible, “style wars” can trigger or heighten anxiety levels. Saito and Samimy (1996) reported that for the Japanese learners in their study, foreign language anxiety became more important as instructional levels increased (i.e., advanced students scored highest in anxiety, intermediate students the lowest, and beginning students fell between the other two).

In addition, language testing may lead to foreign language anxiety (Young, 1991; Daly, 1991). For example, difficult tests, tests that do not match the teaching in class, and unclear or unfamiliar test instructions can all produce learner anxiety.

Anxiety and Other Skills

In the past decade or so, researchers have looked into the effects of anxiety in other language skills. Previous studies suggest that foreign language classroom anxiety is a more general type of anxiety about learning a second language, with a strong speaking anxiety element. Recent research on foreign language anxiety appears to support the existence of language-skill-specific anxieties: listening, reading, and writing.

In terms of listening anxiety, Scarcella and Oxford (1992) mentioned that language learners are likely to become anxious when the listening tasks are too difficult or unfamiliar to them. Later, Oxford (1993) reported that anxiety frequently occurs when students feel that they cannot handle a second language listening activity (e.g., when students feel that they must understand every single word and this does not happen, it can cause great anxiety). Vogely (1998) found several potential sources of listening comprehension anxiety based on students’

reports: input that is not clear or too fast, and students' belief that they must understand every single word. Kim (2000) reports additional potential sources of listening comprehension anxiety, including authentic listening (colloquial speech vs. dictation tasks) and speed of speaking (i.e. sheer delivery speed).

Saito, Horwitz and Garza (1999) developed a new scale to measure foreign language reading anxiety and report that their findings suggest that some people find reading in the target language to be anxiety-provoking. However, they also found that their participants tended to experience lower levels of reading anxiety than general foreign language classroom anxiety. They concluded that foreign language reading anxiety is distinguishable from the more general foreign language classroom anxiety. Sellers (2000), replicating a finding by Oh (1990), found that reading anxiety negatively impacted learners' recall of Spanish texts. Highly anxious students tended to recall overall less passage content than those participants who claimed to experience minimal anxiety. Highly anxious students also tended to experience more off-task, interfering thoughts than their less-anxious counterparts. Kim (2002) reported literacy anxiety, that is, reading anxiety caused by reading abstract texts with unfamiliar content. Kim (1998) found that students in a conversation class experienced higher anxiety levels than students in a reading class.

Finally, Cheng, Horwitz and Schallert (1999) looked at the relationship between language anxiety and writing. They found that second language writing anxiety, as operationalized by the SLWAT (Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test), appears to be a language-skill-specific anxiety because it not only had a higher correlation with writing achievement but also had significant predictive ability in this aspect only. They suggest, therefore, that the anxiety generally associated with language classes and writing anxiety are clearly distinguishable. Kim

(2002) found that writing performance anxiety was due to finding the right vocabulary and lack of confidence in meeting the instructor's expectations.

Measuring Foreign Language Anxiety

The most commonly used measurement of foreign language anxiety is the "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale" (FLCAS) (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). According to Horwitz (1986), "This self-report measure assesses the degree of anxiety, as evidenced by negative performance expectancies and social comparisons, psychophysiological symptoms, and avoidance behaviors" (p. 559). Horwitz (2001) notes that "with the development of distinct situation-specific measures of foreign language anxiety, the issue of appropriate anxiety measurement seemed to be resolved..." (p. 115).

The FLCAS contains 33 items, each answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." It measures a person's level of anxiety by coming up with an anxiety score by adding up the ratings on the 33 items. The possible range is 33 to 165; the higher the number, the higher the level of foreign language anxiety. Horwitz (1986) reports that internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha was .93, based on a sample of 108 participants. Test-retest reliability over a period of eight weeks was .83. The construct validity of the FLCAS is based on correlations which indicate that the FLCAS can be distinguished from measures of other types of anxiety.

How Can We Reduce Foreign Language Anxiety and Increase Engagement?

So knowing that foreign language anxiety exists and that it can have negative effects on the learning process, what can we do as teachers to reduce it – and thus increase student engagement – in the classroom? The first step is to simply be aware of the possibility of

language learning anxiety. The students sitting in the back row not saying anything may not be bored or disinterested or unmotivated; rather they might just be very anxious. We might be able to help these students succeed in learning the language if we can reduce their anxiety. Numerous researchers (e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986; Horwitz, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Lavine and Oxford, 1990; Scarcella and Oxford, 1992; Crookall and Oxford, 1991; Campbell and Ortiz, 1991; Powell, 1991; Young, 1999) have recommended ways to reduce anxiety in the language classroom.

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) state: “In general, educators have two options when dealing with anxious students: (1) they can help them learn to cope with the existing anxiety provoking situation; or (2) they can make the learning context less stressful” (p. 131). In other words, we can help students reduce their anxiety levels by focusing on the students’ characteristics that are causing the anxiety, as well as by focusing on what we do as teachers and what goes on inside the classroom.

For anxiety stemming from learner characteristics, teachers should have students recognize their irrational beliefs and fears through activities designed for this purpose. Teachers should also recommend that highly anxious students participate in some form of supplemental instruction, such as getting individual tutoring (from the teacher and/or advanced language students) or joining a language club. More exposure to the language, outside of the classroom, may help anxious students become more comfortable with the language and thus help reduce the anxiety.

For anxiety stemming from students’ beliefs about learning a language, teachers should discuss with students reasonable expectations for successful language learning. Teachers should help students develop more realistic expectations. For example, students should be informed that

after two years (i.e. four semesters) of language study, they should have basic survival skills in the language. In other words, they will not yet be fluent in the language. Teachers should emphasize that becoming fluent in a second language takes years of continuous language study and practice. It simply is not feasible with just four semesters of language exposure.

Teachers should also help students adopt an attitude that mistakes are a part of language learning and will be made by everyone. Mistakes are not bad; in fact, they indicate that the student is actually learning – going through the language-learning process as their ‘interlanguage’ develops. Finally, teachers should emphasize the importance of conveying meaning as well as grammatical accuracy. In other words, getting your point across is just as important (if not more important) than saying it without any errors.

For anxiety stemming from teacher characteristics, teachers should create a positive learning environment and adopt a role of facilitator instead of drill sergeant. Teachers should learn the students’ names – and then use their names. Furthermore, teachers should use an encouraging rather than threatening style of questioning, avoid sarcasm and intimidation, and give students more positive feedback (e.g., verbal praise).

It is also recommended that teachers be more friendly, relaxed, and patient in the classroom, as well as develop a sense of humor. Teachers should also address the learning styles of all students in the class. Teachers should also avoid overcorrection; that is, teachers should not correct every single error produced by students. A better method is to offer students correct linguistic feedback through modeling (e.g., by repeating what the student said, but with the correct grammar) rather than harsh overt correction.

In terms of testing, teachers should test fairly what the students know rather than by giving “trick questions.” Exams should cover what was taught in the context of how it was

taught. For example, if the students were never allowed to actually practice speaking the language in the classroom (preferably in small groups), an oral exam would not be appropriate. Spending the entire class time covering grammar and then expecting the students to orally produce the language would not be fair. In addition, teachers should provide pre-test practice for the test. At the very least, the teacher could provide the students with an outline of the exam sections (including the instructions on the test) so that the students will know what to expect and will not be surprised. Finally, teachers should designate points on a test for the conveyance of meaning and not just grammar.

For anxiety stemming from classroom procedures, teachers should try to make the classroom as friendly and relaxed as possible. Teachers should be warm and personable and reward effort, risk-taking, and successful communication. It is strongly recommended that teachers use pair/group work as much as possible. This serves two purposes: (1) it allows all the students to get more practice with the language, and (2) it takes the burden off the individual student to perform in front of the whole class and allows more student-student interaction. Teachers should also use a variety of activities in the class, personalize language instruction, and encourage students to have realistic expectations for their language study and be less competitive with each other. Finally, teachers can discuss successful language learning strategies with students and review these throughout the semester.

Crookall and Oxford (1991) present some activities that can be used with language students to help them recognize and deal with anxiety, as well as some activities to help teachers become more aware of language anxiety. They emphasize that we can deal with anxiety directly and explicitly through learner training by helping students consider the factors that affect their learning (i.e., the emphasis is on *how* to learn rather than on *what* to learn).

Campbell and Ortiz (1991) describe a workshop designed to prepare students for language learning. The workshop presents effective language-learning strategies and dispels potential harmful misconceptions about the language-learning process. Typical activities include an icebreaker activity that allows the students to get to know everyone in the class, a discussion of the myths and realities of foreign language learning, a discussion of successful foreign language learning strategies, and a discussion of the ideal language learner. According to Campbell and Ortiz, “The workshop helps the individual student cope with what he or she may perceive as a harrowing experience – learning a foreign language; it also acts as an icebreaker for the class as a whole as it slowly transforms a disparate group of individuals...into a cohesive community of language learners” (p. 158).

Conclusion

Research has established that foreign language anxiety exists. Furthermore, it has shown that foreign language anxiety not only represents an uncomfortable experience for students, but can also have negative effects on the learning process. If we can help students reduce or overcome that anxiety, it will lead to more engagement in the classroom. A “culture of caring” strives to make foreign language learning a more pleasant experience, which in turn will increase engagement and make it a more successful endeavor as well.

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