

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety: How Should the Classroom Teacher Deal with it?

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Abstract

Foreign language anxiety has long been recognized by both classroom teachers and researchers in second/foreign language education, but it is far from completely understood. It has been reported that some types of anxiety debilitate learners' language learning. By examining the research results in foreign/second language anxiety, some implications for classroom teachers and learners can be drawn. Also a small-scale study was carried out to find the relationship between students' language anxiety and beliefs about learning English at a private university. The results suggest that students with negative beliefs about their learning English feel more foreign language classroom anxiety. Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment is one of the primary responsibilities of classroom teachers. Learners also should be made aware of language anxiety and learn how to cope with it.

1. Introduction

Most language teachers have had experience in dealing with students who sit in the back of the classroom, answer questions as little as possible, stay as quiet as possible, and/or show their uncertainty when called upon in class. Are they totally unmotivated? Do they believe that learning English is waste of time? One of the possible causes can be attributed to language anxiety. Research in foreign classroom language anxiety in second/foreign language education in the mid 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Brown, 1973; Horwitz, et al, 1986; Tobias, 1986) shifted educators' attention to affective factors of learners of foreign languages. Since then a number of researchers have tried to understand its construct. The results of the research have some important implications that classroom teachers should be aware of. By examining the research results and the results of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, et al, 1986) (FLCAS, hereafter) - which is designed to measure anxiety specifically found in a foreign language setting - administered at a private university in Shizuoka, the author discusses some ways to deal with language anxiety in the language classroom.

2. Research in Language Anxiety

Most research on language anxiety indicates that there is a negative relationship between anxiety and foreign language learning. However, if we look at each research result, different pictures appear, suggesting that language anxiety is a multi-faceted construct. (Matsuda et al, 2001). Horwitz et al (1986) developed the FLCAS, which consists of three related anxieties: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Several researchers have investigated the relationship between foreign language anxiety and foreign language learning using FLCAS. Phillips (1992) suggests that her students in a French class showed a moderate negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and their oral exam grades. She concludes that "students with higher language anxiety tended to say less, to produce shorter CUs¹), and to use fewer dependent clauses and target structures than low anxiety students" (p.18). Aida (1994) examined students of Japanese using FLCAS with the results showing that students with high anxiety are more likely to receive low grades. She also suggests that communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation consist of language anxiety, but not test anxiety. She con-

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tends that test anxiety is a more general type of anxiety, not specific to foreign language learning. Saito, et al (1999) conducted research on foreign reading anxiety and concluded, “there is at least preliminary support for the existence of FL reading anxiety as a phenomenon related to, but distinct from, general FL anxiety” (p. 211). Similarly, Cheng, et al (1999) examined the links between second language classroom anxiety and second language writing anxiety and suggest that second language writing anxiety is a language-skill-specific anxiety while second language anxiety is a more general type of anxiety about learning a second language with a strong speaking anxiety element. Vogely’s (1998) descriptive research on listening comprehension of students studying Spanish reports that the source of listening anxiety comes from the characteristics of listening comprehension (51%), process-related factors (30%), instructional factors (6%), and personal and interpersonal variables (13%). Matsuda, et al. (2001) conclude that the two scales, FLCAS and Foreign Language Reading Anxiety measure two clearly independent constructs and suggest that limited familiarity with English grammar and vocabulary attributed to more reading anxiety among first-year students than second- or third-year students in their study.

3. The results of FLCAS

FLCAS (translated into Japanese by the author) was administered to 73 non-English major freshmen at a private university in Shizuoka during the spring semester in 2003 to find out how much language anxiety they felt in English classes. The purpose of this small-scale study was to find out how the learners’ beliefs about themselves learning English related to general foreign language anxiety. Four English subjects (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) are required at the school and each class meets twice a week for 14 weeks. The students were all taking a speaking class at that time. After deleting incomplete data, data obtained from 62 students was analyzed in this study. The original FLCAS is a five-point Likert scale, ranging from (a) “strongly disagree” to (c) “neither agree nor disagree” to (e) “strongly disagree”. In order to avoid too many neutral answers from the subjects, a six-point scale, ranging from (1) “strongly disagree”, (2) “disagree”, (3) “slightly disagree”, (4) “slightly agree”, (5) “agree”, to (6) “strongly agree”, was used in this study. Three extra statements concerning general beliefs about themselves learning English were added. They are No. 10 “I want to improve my English”, No. 20 “I’m not good at studying English”, and No. 26 “I hate studying English.” Below are the results of the questionnaire (Table 1).

Table 1 The results of FLCAS

1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English.	1) 29.0%	2) 24.2%	3) 22.6%	4) 14.5%	5) 4.8%	6) 4.8%
2	I don’t worry about making mistakes in English class.	1) 17.7%	2) 17.7%	3) 21.0%	4) 14.5%	5) 14.5%	6) 14.5%
3	I tremble when I know that I’m going to be called on in English class.	1) 24.2%	2) 25.8%	3) 25.8%	4) 6.5%	5) 11.3%	6) 6.5%
4	It frightens me when I don’t understand what the teacher is saying in English.	1) 17.7%	2) 4.8%	3) 21.0%	4) 14.5%	5) 11.3%	6) 30.6%
5	It wouldn’t bother me at all to take more English classes.	1) 17.7%	2) 11.3%	3) 21.0%	4) 12.9%	5) 14.5%	6) 22.6%
6	During English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	1) 35.5%	2) 16.1%	3) 16.1%	4) 17.7%	5) 4.8%	6) 9.7%
7	I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.	1) 38.7%	2) 16.1%	3) 24.2%	4) 11.3%	5) 6.5%	6) 3.2%
8	I am usually at ease during tests in my English class.	1) 27.4%	2) 16.1%	3) 17.7%	4) 17.7%	5) 9.7%	6) 11.3%
9	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.	1) 29.0%	2) 16.1%	3) 25.8%	4) 12.9%	5) 8.1%	6) 8.1%
10	I want to improve my English.	1) 58.1%	2) 17.7%	3) 6.5%	4) 16.1%	5) 0.0%	6) 1.6%
11	I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.	1) 35.5%	2) 24.2%	3) 19.4%	4) 4.8%	5) 9.7%	6) 6.5%

Table 1 (つづき)

12	I don't understand why some people get so upset over English classes. 1) 12.9% 2) 4.8% 3) 17.7% 4) 24.2% 5) 6.5% 6) 33.9%
13	In English class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know. 1) 21.0% 2) 16.1% 3) 37.1% 4) 11.3% 5) 11.3% 6) 3.2%
14	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class. 1) 22.6% 2) 21.0% 3) 22.6% 4) 12.9% 5) 12.9% 6) 8.1%
15	I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers. 1) 14.5% 2) 12.9% 3) 22.6% 4) 17.7% 5) 6.5% 6) 25.8%
16	I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting. 1) 22.6% 2) 12.9% 3) 29.0% 4) 12.9% 5) 9.7% 6) 12.9%
17	Even if I am well prepared for English class, I feel anxious about it. 1) 16.1% 2) 12.9% 3) 33.9% 4) 17.7% 5) 8.1% 6) 11.3%
18	I often feel like not going to my English class. 1) 12.9% 2) 12.9% 3) 27.4% 4) 16.1% 5) 12.9% 6) 17.7%
19	I feel confident when I speak in my English class. 1) 8.1% 2) 0.0% 3) 24.2% 4) 22.6% 5) 9.7% 6) 35.5%
20	I'm not good at studying English. 1) 37.1% 2) 16.1% 3) 17.7% 4) 17.7% 5) 4.8% 6) 6.5%
21	I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make. 1) 12.9% 2) 6.5% 3) 27.4% 4) 8.1% 5) 21.0% 6) 24.2%
22	I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in my English class. 1) 17.7% 2) 17.7% 3) 29.0% 4) 11.3% 5) 12.9% 6) 11.3%
23	The more I study for an English test, the more confused I get. 1) 24.2% 2) 8.1% 3) 32.3% 4) 11.3% 5) 12.9% 6) 11.3%
24	I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for English class. 1) 25.8% 2) 11.3% 3) 22.6% 4) 25.8% 5) 4.8% 6) 9.7%
25	I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do. 1) 29.0% 2) 19.4% 3) 33.9% 4) 3.2% 5) 4.8% 6) 9.7%
26	I hate studying English. 1) 24.2% 2) 9.7% 3) 25.8% 4) 17.7% 5) 6.5% 6) 16.1%
27	I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students. 1) 22.6% 2) 14.5% 3) 29.0% 4) 11.3% 5) 8.1% 6) 14.5%
28	English class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind. 1) 17.7% 2) 6.5% 3) 25.8% 4) 22.6% 5) 12.9% 6) 14.5%
29	I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in my other classes. 1) 14.5% 2) 8.1% 3) 24.2% 4) 21.0% 5) 12.9% 6) 19.4%
30	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class. 1) 19.4% 2) 4.8% 3) 17.7% 4) 25.8% 5) 17.7% 6) 14.5%
31	When I'm on my way to English class, I feel very sure and relaxed. 1) 19.4% 2) 17.7% 3) 14.5% 4) 33.9% 5) 3.2% 6) 11.3%
32	I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says. 1) 12.9% 2) 11.3% 3) 22.6% 4) 24.2% 5) 12.9% 6) 16.1%
33	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak English. 1) 24.2% 2) 11.3% 3) 21.0% 4) 21.0% 5) 11.3% 6) 11.3%
34	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English. 1) 14.5% 2) 6.5% 3) 25.8% 4) 19.4% 5) 12.9% 6) 21.0%
35	I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English. 1) 9.7% 2) 6.5% 3) 37.1% 4) 21.0% 5) 16.1% 6) 9.7%
36	I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance. 1) 22.6% 2) 6.5% 3) 29.0% 4) 19.4% 5) 11.3% 6) 11.3%

The results were calculated by following the method of Aida (1994). For each subject, an anxiety score was calculated by adding his or her ratings of the 33 items. When statements of the FLCAS (in Japanese) were negatively worded, responses were reversed and recoded, so that in all instances, a high score represented high anxiety. The theoretical range of this scale was from 33 to 198. By obtaining the average score for each statement, 21 statements were found to be above 3.5 (the mid point of the six-point Likert scale). Also a little more than half of the subjects (35) score higher than the mid point (119) on the overall anxiety score. This suggests that foreign language anxiety does exist among the subjects surveyed in this study.

Statement 7 received the highest average (4.6). 79% of the subjects expressed that they felt other students were better than themselves. They constantly compared themselves with their classmates, feeling inferior to others. Statement 11 received the second highest average (4.5). 77.1% of the subjects expressed they worried about the consequence of failing English courses. One possible explanation is that since English is a required subject for them, many of the students felt anxious about failing. If English were not a required subject, they probably would not have felt as much anxiety as they did in this study. The next highest average was obtained from statements 1 and 25 (4.4) concerning their English ability compared with other students.

A simple correlational study was done between the overall anxiety scores and beliefs about learning English as sampled by the three statements added by the author (see Table 2 for the results).

Since over eighty percent of the subjects expressed a positive answer to the question, "I want to improve my English," there was no correlation between the statement and their overall foreign language anxiety. Still, it was rather surprising to find out that a high percentage

of non-English major students expressed a desire to improve their English. Many of these same students answered negatively to the following statements: Statement 20, "I'm not good at studying English" ($r = -.499$, $p < .01$), and statement 26, "I hate studying English" ($r = -.512$, $p < .01$) were negatively correlated to the overall anxiety. The results of this study suggest that those subjects with negative beliefs about learning the language feel more anxious.

Motoda (2005) finds that students of Japanese as a second language who hold low self-esteem about their Japanese tend to feel more anxiety than those with high self-esteem. She concludes that self-esteem regarding the target language has a stronger relationship with foreign language anxiety than global self-esteem does (Shavelson, et al, 1976, in Motoda). Guiora (in Horwitz, et al, 1986) argues that language itself is "a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition" because it directly threatens an individual's self-concept and world view. Cheng, et al (1999) suggest that language-skill-specific anxiety might well be one of the negative emotions and attitudes formed during the process of second language learning. Therefore, it can be inferred that the subjects in this study have also had negative experiences in learning English in class and come to hold negative beliefs about themselves and learning English. We might have to reconsider any belief that students don't do their best in class due to lack of motivation.

4. Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion

Motoda (2005) classifies the debilitating effects of language anxiety into two categories by compiling the research results of Horwitz et al (1986) and Scarcella & Oxford (in Motoda, 2005). Language anxiety results in 1) failure or confusion and 2) avoidance or excessive effort. Examples of category 1) are: students lose con-

Table 2 Correlation between anxiety and beliefs about learning English
Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
ANXIETY	123.95	26.486	62
N 10	1.87	1.248	62
N 20	4.44	1.564	62
N 26	3.79	1.719	62

Correlations

		ANXIETY	S 10	S 20	S 26
ANXIETY	Pearson Correlation	1	-.101	.449**	.512**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.435	.000	.000
	N	62	62	62	62

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

centration, tend to forget what they have learned, repeat careless mistakes, choose wrong answers even though they knew the correct ones on tests, become nervous in role-playing, produce less interpretive messages, and pronounce English less fluently. They also tend to show physiological symptoms such as feeling tense, palpitations, sweating, trembling, and/or even sleepiness. Category 2) consists of the following behavioral responses as a result of anxious experiences learners have had. They often skip classes, come to class late and/or without preparation, postpone their homework, avoid studying, avoid spontaneous speech, pretend to be indifferent, or, conversely, study too much.

Many of the symptoms mentioned above can be interpreted as typical examples of a lazy student. However, we, as language teachers, must take into account the debilitating effects that language anxiety might have on learners. As many teachers have come to agree, creating a relaxing classroom climate - for example, where students can freely ask for clarifications and repetitions, especially in speaking and listening classes - is critical. This can be achieved by avoiding complicated instructions or competitive classroom procedures, recognizing students as individuals, and letting them realize that perfection is not necessary. MacIntyre et al (1997) suggest that anxious students tend to underestimate their proficiency, so teachers should give them a lot of encouragement in evaluating themselves. Discussing with your students what they have become able to do, not what they cannot yet do, can give learners some concrete criteria to positively evaluate themselves.

Young (1991) discusses many useful techniques to create a low-anxiety classroom environment. It is important for the teacher to repeatedly and clearly express that they are aware of the existence of foreign language anxiety in the learners. Still, some students continue to feel anxiety about a particular environment. One of my students expressed in her learning log that she felt anxious when I stood next to her, peeking at her workbook in my listening class. It is impractical to try to create a completely anxiety-free classroom environment. However, we, as classroom teachers, should be aware of its existence, show our understanding of it, and teach students how to live and cope with it. Further research on what elements and/or classroom environment would alleviate learners' foreign language classroom anxiety would be beneficial for both teachers and learners.

Notes

- 1) Communication Units: According to Phillips, CU is basically an independent clause with all its modifiers.
- 2) Although the original statement was positively worded, the Japanese statement was negatively stated because the author felt it would communicate better to the subjects.

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要 旨

外国語学習不安：語学教師はいかに対処すべきか？

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外国語学習不安は久しく外国語教師および第2言語／外国語教育の研究者に認知されてきたが、全容解明には至っていない。ある種の学習不安は外国語学習に悪影響を及ぼすと報告されてきた。第2言語／外国語教育に於ける学習不安に関する研究結果を考察することにより教師と学習者にその対応策を引き出すことができる。本稿では私立大学において学習者の英語学習に対する考え方と学習不安の関係を解明すべくアンケート調査を行い、統計処理を実施した。その結果は自分の英語学習に対して否定的な考えを持つ学習者はより学習不安を感じる傾向にあると示唆している。教室内でいかに学習不安のレベルを下げるかが教師の重要な役割のひとつであると同時に、学習者も学習不安の存在を客観的に認知することが必要であると論じた。