

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

Jennie Lynch, La Trobe University

When considering the introduction for this paper it struck me that we often talk of and hear about best practice in pedagogy, testing, management, administration CALL and such but that we omit what the fundamental purpose of all these is : learning. Our job, as ELICOS teachers, is to make it as simple as possible for our students to learn English.

The nature of our ELICOS “industry” often places many constraints on us as teachers. We find that our students are in Australia to learn English for a short period of time, sometimes only ten weeks. We run five week courses and students expect to be promoted at the end of that time, no matter how far they have developed. We have set syllabus we need to get through in a short period of time or alternatively we have to create a syllabus every five weeks. On the one hand we have excursions to run for our tourist orientated students, and on the other students who need to prepare for IELTS . 6.5. That is to say we often get caught up in the content and administration of back to back courses and have little time to consider how learning takes place.

In such day to day practice we can overlook those affective factors which influence learning to a great degree. I think it is harder as a teacher in ELICOS than other courses because we do have such a high turnover of students in our courses. It takes time to consider the affective needs of the individuals in our classes: time to get to know the students and time to plan action for each one.

Today I’d like to take the time to indulge in reflection of one particular affective factor student anxiety in the classroom. It goes without saying that most of our students are anxious when they come to live in a foreign country for the first time and we know those anxieties are to do with acculturation factors and such, but what of those students who are anxious in the classroom. Why are they anxious? How does this affect their learning? What can we, as teachers, do to relieve the anxiety they feel?

Before addressing these questions, we need to sort out what is exactly meant by foreign language classroom anxiety.

1. WHAT IS FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM ANXIETY?

When we think of anxiety we tend to think of anxiety as a psychological construct. The definition of foreign language classroom anxiety in the 1970s borrowed from psychology. At that time second language research was still unpacking the layers of affective variables that were thought to influence language learning. Anxiety was just one of these intrinsic affective variables identified. As research further developed a number of hypothesis and definitions about language anxiety were suggested by a number of people.

The first of these constructs are trait and state anxiety. As the name suggests, trait anxiety is something internal to the learner and state is an anxiety created by external influences. We can accept that such anxieties occur in language learning classes, but the fact is that such anxieties are not specific to the context.

The following three types of anxiety do significantly contribute to foreign language classroom anxiety. The first is communication anxiety which is a fear about orally communicating. Studies have found that the Japanese culture has the highest degree of communication anxiety. That is many Japanese people fear communicating in their first language. Undoubtedly, the anxiety levels would be increased even further when speaking in a second language.

The second of these is test anxiety which as it states is a fear of test situations. Such situations appear more often in a language classroom as students with this anxiety judge every utterance as a test for them.

The third is a fear of negative evaluation. Here a learner is anxious about how peers and teachers perceive her, in terms of both academic ability and personal evaluation. In a language learning context such a fear is extremely debilitating as evaluation is constantly taking place in the classroom context.

Another important concept in the debate on language anxiety is facilitating and debilitating anxiety. Facilitating anxiety is that which enhances the language learning task as the learner is focused and attentive to the task at hand. Debilitating is that which has a negative effect on the learner and that which this paper concentrates on.

More recently, in the late 80s, two theoretical models of foreign language anxiety have emerged. These are the ones I have worked with. The first is a self-concept model and the second based on student experiences.

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope have described foreign language anxiety in the following way. "Foreign Language Anxiety is not simply a combination of these fears(as above) transferred to a foreign language context. Rather we conceive foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex set of self perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from uniqueness of the language learning process."

As further explanation the second language is likely to challenge an individual's self concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence and self consciousness fear and even panic. Of importance here is the disparity between the true self as known to the language learner and the more limited self that can be exposed in L2. This distinguishes foreign language anxiety from other anxieties. What is important then is self concept and self expression.

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope have developed a questionnaire to identify anxious learners. It is called the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. It has 32 questions which contain elements that have been found to be the base of language learning anxiety.

The second theoretical model has been devised by McIntyre and Gardner. Their model is based on student experience. It describes how language anxiety becomes differentiated from other anxieties. In the beginning language learning anxiety is not different. It is a negative affective response to the same classroom experience. However if these negative experiences continue, such anxiety becomes associated with language classes and therefore differentiated from other contexts. It has a negative effect on language learning as anxious students think about not only the task at hand, but they have a heightened self awareness

about how they interact with the task and this negatively affects the task of language learning. Low anxiety learners are able to concentrate on the task itself.

So foreign language classroom anxiety can be thought of in two ways, as a self-concept, self-expression, identity anxiety or as a development of negative experiences, in negative environments.

CAUSES OF ANXIETY AND EFFECTS ON STUDENTS

Let us now turn to explore the causes of language anxiety in students and the effects it can have on them. In order to do this I will work from Horwitz definition and break anxiety down into self perceptions , beliefs, feelings and behaviours.

1. SELF PERCEPTIONS

A number of points need to be made here. Firstly research has revealed that anxious students feel deep self consciousness when asked to risk revealing themselves by speaking a foreign language in presence of others. That is they will not take risks in speaking . Associated with this is the threat that speaking a foreign language poses to the student's world view. Foreign language learning has been likened to a "birthing process of a new self". If the individual has something to lose, if her world view is challenged, if her sense of place in the world is questioned ,we see signs of anxiety.

Secondly, the fact that students learn in a second language environment can impact on their levels of classroom anxiety. If they have positive experiences within that environment their self esteem will be heightened, but of course the inverse will result from negative experiences outside the classroom. So the type of interaction with native speakers is an important factor for our students learning English in a second language environment.

Thirdly many students experience frustration at not being able to communicate effectively in the second language. They see themselves as limited and not able to reveal their true self to their interlocutors.

Hence there is an intimate relationship between self concept and self expression that makes foreign language anxiety very different from other anxieties and we as teachers need to be aware of this in our classroom practices.

2.BELIEFS

A student's belief about language learning can also impact on their levels of anxiety in the classroom. Horwitz again has developed a questionnaire which isolates a student's beliefs about language learning, the Belief About Language Learning Inventory It covers five areas ,beliefs about aptitude for foreign languages, the nature of foreign language learning, the learning and communication strategies for it, student motivations for learning and the degree of difficulty of learning a foreign language.

3. FEELINGS

A number of elements come under this heading.

The first thing to note is that some students actually have physical reactions to anxiety in the classroom. They also

have difficulty concentrating

are forgetful
display avoidance behaviours such as missing class and postponing homework
Sweat
palpitations
freeze in speech acts
have no idea what has just been said
laugh nervously
act the clown

Another important element in levels of anxiety is a student's motivation for learning the language. If motivation is merely instrumental, that is in order to get a job or the like anxieties are likely to be higher than if motivation is integrative. If motivation is integrative the affective filter is lowered, students want to be a member of the club and anxiety is reduced.

A third feeling that can create foreign language anxiety is the discrepancy between a student's effort and reward. Often the rewards of learning a language are delayed and students have deep feeling of frustration and anxiety.

Finally there are feelings about different types of methodology in language learning. As we all know students are often threatened by the communicative methodologies of our classrooms. If students are asked to perform before they are ready or to perform above their acquired competence anxiety will result. The teachers role in the learning process is also important in reducing student anxiety. There are methodologies specifically designed to reduce anxiety and promote affective positive attitudes in learners. The Natural Approach is one such methodology.

4.BEHAVIOURS

Bailey in her diary studies identified competitive behaviour as leading to increased states of anxiety. Obvious self comparison, the desire to outdo classmates and emotive responses to such and the desire to gain teachers approval all indicate heightened levels of anxiety in learners.

From the above it's obvious that students in foreign language classrooms feel the most anxious when speaking and secondly when listening to the second language. The more passive skills of reading and writing skills do not provoke the same levels of anxiety in students.

MY STUDY OF ELICOS STUDENTS

The categories above and the information contained within each have been developed from studies with college students studying in the USA and Canada. In these studies foreign language is studied in a very different context from ours. They were studying a foreign language as part of a college degree and therefore for only a small number of hours a week. But most importantly they were studying the second language in a first language environment.

So the question to ask is do our students, full time ELICOS students have the same anxieties for the same reasons? If we look at our classes we are able to identify those who are anxious for one of another of the above reasons.

Over the past six months I have carried out qualitative research to determine whether the categories above do indeed fit our ELICOS students. The data were collected from a class of upper-intermediate general students over a ten week period. Students were asked to keep a journal about their experiences in class. They were given some time in class to complete this task. Each of the sixteen students wrote about twelve entries each.

Students were also given the BALLI and the FLCAS. However the journals were the basis of the data. The results can be largely fitted within the above categories, but two further factors were revealed that influenced the anxiety levels of many of our ELICOS students.

Using student journal entries I'll first cover the self perceptions of our students. They certainly do contribute to anxiety levels of students.
Our students do have concerns about their self perceptions in language learning.

1. RISK TAKING

"You asked us what the stories were about. Although I had got the correct answers I didn't say because I was not sure about my answers."

2. NEGATIVE EVALUATION

"I felt perplexed because I was afraid of other people finding my speaking poor...."
"I'm afraid of the others."

3. THREATENS WORLD VIEW

"It's hard for me to share the same opinions with other students. I shouldn't ignore others views, and I have to express my own opinion. To learn to combine my ideas with others is important."

4. COMPARISON OF SELF TO OTHERS

"..I felt inferior in class, especially in speaking."
"Others speak very well in this class. It's difficult for me to catch up with them."
"I felt perplexed because my typing speed was quite slower than other students."
"I felt nervous because some students were doing this task without a dictionary. I couldn't do this task without a dictionary."
"..when I do pair work I feel sorry for my partner."

5. FRUSTRATION

"...I felt nervous, I couldn't concentrate and I couldn't speak what I want to express..."
"...I was so confused because I don't have enough vocabulary to tell the story. My classmates might not understand me. I'm so irritated when I want to talk with them..."

6. PHYSICAL REACTIONS

"My heart beats faster."

“I felt nervous, my hands became cold..”
“My heart beats faster and my face turns red.”

SPEAKING AND LISTENING.

“I’m not good at talking in front of people.”
“Actually, I don’t like speaking in front of people.”
“I felt nervous in speaking to the class today.”
“I felt comfortable in speaking because the topic was somewhat practical.
I feel comfortable when I deal with practical topics.”
“...my speaking isn’t fit for this level.”
“I can’t speak in front of the class”
“Recording my voice made me nervous.”
“The most nervous time for me was when I had to record my voice on tape.”
“Today made me feel tired. Always after listening I feel tired.”

It is interesting to note the anxiety students felt when they were asked to speak onto a tape in the language laboratory. Their diaries reveal this as anxiety provoking and field notes I took during that period show how many students were extremely nervous with the task. Even those who were not anxious when talking in class displayed high anxiety with this task.

However there are two further factors that are revealed in many of the journal entries. These two were not mentioned in any of the literature. They seem to be particular to our ELICOS students. They are obviously related to students studying in a foreign country and a second language environment.

The first is the role of classmates in reducing/enhancing anxiety and the second is the degree to which self talk is used in an effort to reduce their anxiety. These are only a few examples of what I mean.

IMPORTANCE OF CLASSMATES

“Everyone is friendly. I can chat with them.”
“..I can’t talk in front of people who are strangers to me.”
“I need more time to become familiar so I can’t say my thoughts.”
“..I hope I can get along with my classmates.”
“I feel better than last week. I come to be able to talk with my classmates.
Becoming more familiar will help me study.”
“When I talked with my classmates, I could talk without being ashamed.”
“Compared with the first few weeks, I come to talk with my classmates.”
“Sitting with a person who was good at English I came to think I would do well.”
“My classmates are so quiet nowadays. I seem to follow them. I hope they become more active so I will too.”

SELF TALK

“I think I’d better speak more, but I can’t talk.”
“I think I need more confidence.”
“I think I should study vocabulary.”
“In fact, I’d like to speak well, so I try to speak more in class.”
“I have to learn by myself.”

“I have to practise listening.”

“I have to work harder.”

Other points of interest that came out of the diary studies were:

the first few weeks of students arriving in the Centre were particularly difficult for them
not all students felt this anxiety, but most of this small sample did
there was no difference in gender or in cultural background.
into week four of the course students seemed to be less anxious. In week five there was a change in the class. Two new students moved in and four moved out. This seemed to have a negative effect on the class. Most of the negative statements came at about week 2/3 of the second block of five weeks e.g. all my classmates seemed to be quiet
the results of the BALLI AND FLCAS were confirmed with their diary entries

HOW CAN WE HELP STUDENTS MANAGE THEIR ANXIETIES?

Firstly we need to identify those students who are anxious. This can be done formally using the FLCAS which has been well trailed and found to be valid. In my studies the results of the FLCAS matched the diary entries. It could also be done informally, as the trained eye is able to sort out those students experiencing anxiety.

Class cohesion is undoubtedly a vital factor in reducing classroom anxiety for many of our students. It comes as no surprise. ELICOS students are learning English in a foreign language environment and rely heavily on the support of their peers both emotionally and academically. However developing the necessary confidence and trust in their peers is difficult given the constraints we work within and when courses are being broken into shorter and shorter modules. For example in a five week course it is not easy to build up the necessary level of support and trust between students in the class. The diaries do show that it is only after the first few weeks that many students feel comfortable taking risks in the classroom and when the class structure changes, even minimally, anxieties are affected.

Self talk is very important. Throughout the journals students were constantly talking themselves through their anxieties by developing strategies, giving themselves advice and urging themselves through the language learning process. We as teachers must provide the means by which the students can utilise self talk to reduce their anxiety.

Further strategies that could be used to reduce anxiety are the use of group work, dispelling students' beliefs about language learning that negatively impact on their learning, creating a secure atmosphere in the classroom and in testing, testing what you teach and in the way in which it was taught.

CONCLUSION

I'm sure there are many other ways of managing anxiety in the classroom.

When we see a student is anxious we all make a point of speaking to her and trying to reassure her about the language learning process.

But perhaps we should absorb a reduction of student anxiety into our personal theories of teaching. We should take anxiety on board in a more encompassing way. A way where we will access all students; that is in an explicit way in the classroom, by talking about anxieties, by using techniques to reduce anxieties. In this way we will be working towards achieving best practice in not only pedagogy, but also in learning.

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