

Language Anxiety in English Performance

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Abstract—Language anxiety refers to the nervousness or low feeling language learners experienced in the course of second or foreign language learning process. In the second or foreign language learning, most learners have experienced the language anxiety. They feel embarrassed when they have to speak in English in classroom. In order to make it known to students and teachers, this paper introduces language anxieties and its factors, manifestations, effects and sources. Suggestions are presented for students to lower their anxieties.

Keywords—language anxiety; language learner; affect; English performance

I. INTRODUCTION

As an English teacher, the author of the paper is puzzled by a fact in teaching, that is, some students can learn English well. They are active in English learning, quick to respond, quick in remembering words, quick in understanding sentences. But some students don't perform so well in class. Reviewing the literature of studies on language learning, the author found that a number of explanations have been discussed about the situation. Some studies regard intelligence as a factor resulting in the difference, they think IQ determines everything. But more studies think that EQ is more important to influence foreign language learning. Recently, the role of anxiety has been discussed in papers.

Language anxiety, a factor of EQ, is a particular kind of feeling. It can be defined by Macintyre and Gardner in 1994 as the fear or tension occurring in the process of foreign language learning. It can occur in every aspect in foreign language learning: listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. But the degree of anxiety differs in the 5 skills. Horwitz and Cope think that language anxiety is a series of complicated feelings, conceptions and behavior that are unique to foreign or second language learning. Other studies define it in different ways. For example, language anxiety is the feeling of embarrassment, nervousness, occurred when you have to speak in a second language or foreign language in any situations, in a classroom, in a hotel, or in a supermarket. It is a feeling of inferiority haunts every language learner who performs badly.

As it can be seen, the definitions about language anxiety are different in different linguists in their studies. But all the definitions share the same key words, which are feeling, language learning, foreign. The keys define the scope discussed in this paper.

II. EFFECTS OF ANXIETY ON LANGUAGE LEARNING

Researches on the effects of language anxiety show different results. These studies include Spanish/Portuguese and Arabic ESL students by Kleinmann (1977). Steinberg and Horwitz focused on the ratio of denotative and interpretive story content. Young focused on the oral performance of language teachers. All these studies show that language anxiety and language learning are interrelated. The relations are very complicated. The effects of anxiety on language learning are different. Some are positive, some are negative, and some are even conflicting to others. But the author of this paper mainly focuses on the bad effects of language anxiety on English performance.

III. STUDENTS MANIFESTATIONS OF ANXIETY

Leary, in 1986, presented three kinds of manifestations occurring in social anxiety. He categorizes them as arousal-mediated responses, disaffiliative behaviors and image-protection behaviors.

Arousal-mediated responses are the subconscious action of language learners' nervous system: they have no purposes or real functions, and often come together with all stirring states. When students can not sit still on their stools, when they play with their pens, books or other things, when they can not utter sound naturally and clearly in conversation, they manifest anxiety.

The activities that decrease social interactions are categorized as disaffiliative behaviors. Students manifest them when they do not like to start a conversation or even do not like to participate in communications, when they often keep silent in conversations, and when they speak fast and finish speeches quickly facing large audience in public situations.

Image-protection behaviors refer to those who smile and nod frequently, seldom interrupt others, and respond by "uh-huh." now and then. In Leary's opinion, these responses can safeguard the listeners' faces. They pretend to understand every sentence. In this way, the listeners don't lose faces. They avoid embarrassment in this way.

Rardin, in 1991, posits that the high degree of language anxiety could manifest itself by signs of palms sweating, stomach's nervousness, heartbeat and pulse rates accelerating. Some students in the author's classroom act in this way sometimes. They stutter and stammer when answering

questions. Their voices are twisted. They speak English without right intonation and rhythm. Some of them speak unfinished sentences or even word by word, phrase by phrase. Some students just stand up and say "sorry" after a long time. Some even lower their head and keep silent.

The manifestations mentioned above are seen in Chinese English learners. In other countries, there are more complicated situations. Different people, different language learning and different background will result in different manifestation.

IV. SOURCES OF LANGUAGE ANXIETY

In order to deal with the effects of language anxiety, it is necessary to analyze the source of it. There are many factors leading to language anxiety. They may be language learners' personal characters. They can also be the process of language learning and teaching. The main sources of language anxiety are discussed as follow.

Self-esteem is the self-evaluation according to the environment one is in. When a student, proficient in his native language, has to use a foreign language or second language which he is not familiar with, his self-esteem will be hurt. In order to protect his self-esteem, the student will be in extreme anxiety all the time. He is afraid to make mistakes in speaking, reading and writing, especially in classroom. Because nobody would like to be laughed at, nobody would like to lose face. Classroom procedures anxieties are mainly related to the tasks that students have to speak in English before their classmates. For example, the interviews in the author's study showed that 25 of the 40 interviewees said that the English presentations at the blackboard challenge them most, and they feel anxious most. Other sources of anxiety are questions and being asked to answer questions in English.

Competitiveness is also a source of language anxiety. Competitiveness is an ability learners are born with. It is inter-related with language anxiety. Baliey analyzed diaries of 11 students and found the inborn competitiveness can incur language anxiety. It is students' nature to compare with others, when they find that they are not as good at English as others, they think that they are less able and anxiety occur.

In language learning, there are always some vague, indistinct words, phrases, sentences and structures. Students have to guess, analyze and try again and again to get the right meaning. But they dare not risk, because they are afraid to make mistakes, they don't know what to do, frightened by criticism. Lacking enough practice, these students are frustrated and can't develop their language learning well.

Language testing can also bring about anxieties. But not every kind of testing system arouses anxiety. Usually teachers test students what they are lectured in class. Students prepare the test readily. They are confident about the test result. Only those who didn't attend the class experience anxiety. But when teachers test what they did not lecture, almost all students experience anxiety. They are not sure about the material, the testing items or the formula

because they are not familiar with that, this time, they experience anxieties.

Other language learning practices include vocabulary, classroom interaction, oral practices, quizzes of grammar, real situation communication. Students tend to form some false beliefs which they pick up from others. In China, some language learners have developed several unrealistic beliefs in language learning. These beliefs could lead to anxiety. For example, most Chinese ESL learners can not sound like a native speaker. But their teachers tell them that pronunciation is a very important part in language learning, nobody can understand them if they can not pronounce correctly, those who can't pronounce well feel very nervous and fear that they will fail in language learning. Another example, some teacher says fluency is also important, and students should achieve fluency in two years. This scared students because they found they cannot achieve fluency even after they learned English for 10 years. So they get frustrated and stressed. In other words, when students find that they can't do perfectly on the beliefs, they experience anxiety.

V. SUGGESTIONS FOR REDUCING FOREIGN OR SECOND LANGUAGE ANXIETY

Although there are bad effects of language anxiety on language learning, ways can also be found to overcome or decrease its effects on us. For a long time, researchers are trying to seek ways to diminish language anxiety.

To deal with classroom anxieties, students' confidence must be developed and encouraged by teachers. Instructors can help develop students' confidence. Instructors can encourage students to speak out their anxieties and ask them to write their anxieties on the blackboard. Students will see that others have the same problem. They are not alone. Another technique to reduce language anxiety is the use of a graph. Students draw lines for different levels of anxiety to show that different students have different level of anxiety. When following some methods, their level of anxiety decreased. They become more confident because they see the lines in the graph changes. The graph helps students see themselves objectively.

To reduce personal and interpersonal anxiety, learners can participate some extra curriculum courses or some mutual group, ask help from tutor, join an English corner, do relaxation exercises and do self-talk. Self-talk is very helpful in dealing with the state anxiety which refers to a special anxiety aroused in a special situation, e.g., a test, a composition, and any sort of the 5 skills. In the process of language learning, one of the best ways to alleviate students' anxiety in language speaking situations is to make full use of the function of language for self-relaxation, self-conditioning and self-comfort.

Examples of self-talk are:

"It is nothing at all. I can do it."

"The question is not so difficult. I think I can work it out."

"Take it easy."

To reduce anxiety based on interactions between instructors and learners, instructors must pay attention to teaching ways and use correct formula to diminish competitiveness in classroom. Some teachers like to use points to grade students. They hope to encourage students to work harder. But in fact, this will add to students' anxiety. They can encourage students to concentrate relaxation, but not in anxiety. Those who get low grades feel shamed and fear to express themselves naturally in classroom. In the end, they may lose interest in English learning. Secondly, teachers should set an obvious target in every class, and encourage students to realize the target actively. If they achieve the target, they taste the success pleasingly. They will keep going to practice this again and again until they achieve bigger success. Finally, to decrease language testing anxieties, instructors must construct fair testing method. The test paper should include the most knowledge that is taught in class and use those testing items which are familiar to language learners. Also, instructors should use testing method which is familiar to the students. In this way they can do well in reducing their anxiety.

Corporation in language study can decrease anxieties associated with the classroom procedures. Cooperation in language study can help students of different levels to accomplish the same task through communication, discussion, interaction and cooperation, through cooperation in language learning, all the students, including students of lower levels, can benefit from the group work. So instructors should design more pair works, or games and real use of language situation. When students are doing pair work or group work their responsibilities are diluted and they are not very nervous any more. Their anxieties are reduced. Colorful games greatly help stimulate students learning interest, encourage student participation, and reduce language anxiety. In real practice of language situation, for example, practicing English, in English bar or English cafeteria where they can find English-speaking people and start a real conversation with them, they can quickly adapt themselves to the situation and have a good practice of English in a relaxed atmosphere.

Language anxiety is a very complicated phenomenon and difficult to handle. Teachers and students should work together to deal with it. Of course, here the paper discusses some suggestions; more suggestions are waiting for more researchers to explore.

VI. CONCLUSION

In English learning, Chinese students come from different places; they have different learning background, arrive at different language levels, and possess different learning styles, so they have different result in English learning. This paper mainly discusses language anxieties in Chinese students' English learning. It analyzes the effects of language anxiety, points out its manifestations in students, and discusses sources of Chinese EFL learners' anxiety in learning foreign language. Based on the author's teaching experience, five sources of anxiety were found. And respectively, five suggestions were provided and put into

teaching practice. They prove to be effective. It suggests that if teachers are willing to create an easy and relaxing classroom atmosphere and promote more positive experience of learners rather than the anxiety provoking ones, students will feel more self-confident and develop their language ability more efficiently. The paper reminds Chinese teachers of their students' condition. It suggests some ways to solve foreign language learners' affect problem and how to achieve higher efficiency in foreign language learning and teaching field. The author of this paper hope English teachers in China can notice the affect of students when they are learning English, and make a change in their English teaching. Of course, it is also worth noting that the solution of learners affect problems does not mean the solution of all the problems in language learning. Attention paid to affect is not the denying of the importance of cognitive activities and capacity. Cognition and affect are of the same importance in language learning and teaching. Neglecting either of them will lead to failure.

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