Anxiety in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract— **Anxiety is one of the emotions that affect language learning. Knowing the causes of anxiety can help the teacher understand and analyze the problems caused by anxiety among students so as to take effective strategies to help students complete their assignments successfully and improve their learning outcomes.**

Keywords- foreign language learning; anxiety; strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Second language learning is a complex process, involving many variables, for example, social element, learners' psychological condition, learning environment, and so on. These aspects has to do with internal factors that are part of the learner's personality. Although learning a language and using it are basically interactive activities that depend on varying types of relationships with others, the second language acquisition process is strongly influenced by individual personality of the learners. The way we feel about ourselves and our abilities can either facilitate or impede our learning. Learner-intrinsic factors will have a basically positive or negative influence. This paper focuses on ANXIETY, one of the emotions that affect language learning so that it may help teachers understand their students and help their students go through difficulties in language learning.

II. WHAT IS LANGUAGE ANXIETY?

Language anxiety is fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language [1]. This anxiety is linked directly to performing in the target language, so it is not just a general performance anxiety. Language anxiety ranks high among factors influencing language learning, regardless of whether the setting is formal or informal.

III. HELPFUL ANXIETY AND HARMFUL ANXIETY

Once language anxiety has evolved into a lasting trait, it can have pervasive effects on language learning and language performance.

A. Helpful Anxiety

Some research suggested that language anxiety was actually helpful in some ways--high language proficiency and self-confident among a hand-picked group of excellent language learners;--oral production of difficult English structures among native Arabic-speakers and Spanish-speakers--good grades in language classes for students in regular French, German, and Spanish classes but not for students in the audio-lingual classes .

B. Harmful Anxiety

Though some language researchers assert that a positive mode of anxiety exists, most language research shows a negative relationship between anxiety and performance.

Anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor that obstructs the learning process. It is associated with negative feelings such as uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and tension. Heron divides existential anxiety into three interconnected components that are relevant to language classroom: acceptance anxiety, Will I be accepted, liked, wanted? Orientation anxiety, Will I understand what is going on? Performance anxiety, Will I be able to do what I have come to learn?

When anxiety is present in the classroom, the learning effect will be low. Anxiety has negative influences on learners' self-esteem, confidence, communicative competence and exams. It makes learners shy and afraid in foreign language class because they are afraid of making mistakes in speaking, writing and reading. In class communication, they are so nervous in front of the teacher and other classmates that they avoid answering questions, or the answer is short and unclear, even they daren't open their mouth. In listening exercise, because of nervousness, they cannot focus their attention. Their brains go blank after listening. They cannot develop their ability, which leads to failure in their learning. Anxiety makes us nervous and afraid so contributes to poor performance; this in turn creates more anxiety and even worse performance. The feeling of fear and nervousness are connected to the cognitive side of anxiety, which is worry. Worry wastes energy that should be used for memory and processing on a type of thinking which in no way facilitate the task at hand [2].

Harmful anxiety can be related to plummeting motivation, negative attitudes and beliefs, and language performance difficulties. Gardner and MacIntyre stated that the strongest(negative) correlate of language achievement is anxiety.

IV. WAYS TO IDENTIFY LANGUAGE ANXIETY

Teacher and researchers might sometimes be able to infer language anxiety through tests of general anxiety. Behaviors vary across cultures, and what might seem like anxious behavior in one culture might be normal behavior in another culture. The following are the signs of language anxiety.

- general avoidance: `forgetting` the answer, showing carelessness, cutting class, coming late, arriving unprepared, low levels of verbal production, lack of volunteering in class, seeming inability to answer even the simplest questions.

- Physical actions: squirming, fidgeting, playing with hair or clothing, nervously touching objects, stuttering or stammering, displaying jittery behavior, being unable to reproduce the sounds of intonation of the target language even after repeated practice.

- Physical symptoms: complaining about a headache, experiencing tight muscles, feeling unexplained pain or tension in any part of the body.

- Other signs which might reflect language anxiety, depending on the culture: over-studying, perfectionism, social avoidance, conversational withdrawal, lack of eye contact, hostility, monosyllabic or noncommittal responses, image protection or masking behaviors(exaggerated smile, laughing, nodding, joking), failing to interrupt when it would be natural to do so, excessive competitiveness, excessive self-effacement and self-criticism (`I am so stupid`).

V. CAUSES FOR ANXIETY

A. Learners' Personality and Attitudes Towards Learning

1) Self-esteem: is a self-judgment of worth and value, based on feelings of efficacy, a sense of interacting effectively with one's own environment. Among those highly anxious language students, those with high self-esteem might handle their anxiety better than those with low self-esteem, resulting in better performance.

2) Introversion: extroverts are often stereotyped as being out-going and talkative and, therefore, better language learners, since they are more likely participate openly in the classroom and seek out opportunities to practice. Introverts, might be considered less apt language learners, since they seem to be too reserved, too self-restrained. Students who are shy of socializing and take others' evaluation serious are more highly anxious.

Students who are able to tolerate moderate levels of confusion and more risk-taking are lowly anxious than perfection-seeking students. Because language is arbitrary, there is no necessary connection among words, meaning and pronunciation. Language is full of ambiguity, which needs students to take risks during the process of learning to guess the meaning. Students who seek accuracy and perfection have higher level of anxiety.

B. Teachers' Attitude, Students Class Styles and Learning Experience

Teachers' attitude towards language and students has direct influence on students' anxiety. Teachers who are strict or emphasize the accuracy of language make students nervous. Teaching style influences students. For most students in China, class presentation or oral exam make them highly nervous. Competitiveness can lead to language anxiety. This happens when language learners compare themselves to others or to an idealized self-image, which they can rarely attain. Identity and culture shock: Young suggested that anxiety is lower if a student feels identification, and anxiety is higher if the student does not identify with the language group.

VI. HOW TO REDUCE ANXIETY--- PERSONAL PROPOSALS

Although it is a major obstacle to language learning, anxiety can be reduced. Language teachers can act to reduce anxiety, depending on students' needs and cultural background. Through the analysis of anxiety above, combined with the students' condition of our country, the author proposes the following suggestions to reduce the anxiety for foreign language learning.

A. Build Correct Value of Foreign Language Learning, Have High Self-Esteem and Tolerance of Ambiguity.

Teachers should have correct knowledge of language learning and language teaching so that they can help students build correct value of foreign language learning and get scientific learning strategies. Help students understand that language anxiety episodes can be transient and do not inevitably develop into a lasting problem. If anxiety can not be controlled, it will severely effect the learning process. Students who are able to tolerate moderate levels of confusion and more risk-taking are lowly anxious than perfection-seeking students. Therefore, teachers should not emphasize the idea that language must be accurate. Neither can they blame each of the students' mistakes with unbearable attitude. Teachers should be tolerant of students' language mistakes, help students form tolerance of ambiguity and stand students' imperfect language. Based on these, they design correction methods which are easily accepted by the students. In this way, students may avoid artificial anxiety and finish their assignment with a relaxed and happy mood.

B. Establish Feasible Teaching Styles and Pleasant Learning Atmosphere.

Teachers' aim is to establish a democratic, friendly, relaxed and harmonious learning atmosphere. Students are encouraged to take moderate risks to learn under a comfortable atmosphere without any force. Teachers are friendly, with a smile on the face. Students feel nervous and afraid if the teacher is too serious. Teachers encourage and praise students more often, criticize less often. Teachers should never satire or language at students. Teachers should have a clear objective and the strategies for realizing the objective. Students are encouraged to relax themselves through music, laughter and games and are provided with

different styles of class activities such as, group activity, cooperative study and research study. Awards should be given if it helps students apply their language in exercise. Teachers are to use all kinds of educational situations such as trust situation, success situation, making passive learning into active so that students will voluntarily participate in the class activities to improve their learning results and language competence.

C. Appreciate Students, Face Competition and Make Scientific Appraisal Method.

It should be pointed out that, besides passing knowledge and learning strategies to students, teachers should help lower students' anxiety in class. By giving students chances of success, their self-esteem and confidence can be improved. One way is to appreciate students. To appreciate students and make them realize it give them endless strength. Therefore, teachers should support and encourage students. Give difficult students difficult time limit for different assignments. Praise them positively so that each of the students can experience success to increase their self-esteem and confidence, decreasing the negative effects of failure from competition. Competition can stimulate to work harder, but non-stop over-competition will make students nervous, especially for the students with poor learning results. Many failures will lead to their anxiety. Anxiety makes them nervous and afraid so contributes to poor performance; this in turn creates more anxiety and even worse performance. Finally they lose their confidence in language learning. Teachers are responsible for helping the students objectively evaluate their behaviors and build correct thoughts about themselves. Both teachers and students should realize exam is only one way to test the students' level, but not the final destination of learning so as not to emphasize exam too much. Teachers do not consider exam the only way to evaluate students' capabilities. In language teaching, participation and final exam should be combined. Teachers should have a clear idea of students' level and their improvements, understand their potentials and help them build their confidence. Students should be given an objective, whole appraisal.

D. Cultivate Cross-Culture Consciousness

Language cannot survive without culture. language is limited by culture at the same time. To learn a foreign language well, the knowledge about the society and culture of the target language is necessary. If a student knows nothing about the social conventions, cultural traditions, life styles and customs, it is hard to image he would be a good language learner. For this, some teachers often warn student not to do this or that in front of foreigners. But these kind warnings leads to anxiety. Students dare not open their mouth because they are afraid of making mistakes because of different cultural traditions. Then is it not necessary to cultivate the cross-culture consciousness? The author of this paper admits that it is necessary, but the methods should be proper. While the students master the language, teachers teach them the customs, the way of thinking, habitual expressions and values of the target language. Based on these, teachers help student analyze the difference of the two cultures, find identification in the target language culture. in this way, cross-culture consciousness is cultivated and anxiety is lowered.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper analyzes briefly the features, causes of anxiety in foreign language learning and the strategies to overcome it. The purpose of this paper is to point out anxiety is one of the emotions that affect language learning. With the help from teachers, it can be reduced. Teacher should pay enough attention to this element in language learning. Using strategies to make students' anxiety lowest to improve their learning efficiency.

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