

Foreign language anxiety and learning

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Abstract:

This study investigates foreign language anxiety that can have some serious effects not only on the students' performance but also on the whole process of learning among students learning a new language. Studies have shown that students who suffer from stress, anxiety or nervousness face considerable complications in foreign language acquisition. Their performance abilities in acquiring the new language are impeded and thwarted and that will illicit to difficulty or failure in second language acquisition.

Keywords: anxiety, language acquisition, thwarted performance, cognition, the negative impact.

1. Introduction

Anxiety might come first among the factors that play a role in thwarting and complicating the process of learning. The feeling of anxiety can be evolved from a new experience that is unfamiliar to the learner and creates in him/her a sense of discomfort, pressure and distress. No doubt, learning a foreign language is a complicated process at which learners come across different levels of challenges and complexity. It is an experience through which the learner is pushed into a new world, culture, way of thinking and a new experience (Lupdag, 1984). Such experience directly threatens the learner's self-concept because it is "a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition" (Horwitz, 1986). According to Young, "language learning is a complex process that addresses fundamental subjects such as the components of language, cognition, learning behaviors, prior language experience, learner personality, classroom circumstances, culture, pragmatics, and intergroup relations"(Young,1991). Students who acknowledge their failure in learning a new language are those who have a mental block against learning a foreign language due to their high debilitating anxiety.

1.2 Foreign language anxiety:

Language anxiety refers to the “apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient” (Gardner & Macintyre 1993). Many researchers (Hortwiz & Cope 1986) have supported the presupposition that foreign language anxiety does in fact exist. They regard language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, behaviors related to a classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process.” Language anxiety is a complex situation that is associated with feelings of doubt and apprehension that can block the learning process. McIntyre and Gardner (1991) outline that “language anxiety can interfere with the acquisition, retention and production of the new language”.

The role of language teachers in relation to their students’ feeling of anxiety is deemed highly crucial in a positive or negative way. The teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, perceptions towards language learning and teaching process have the potential of either causing or reducing language anxiety in the learners. Indeed, Young suggests that “for many learners, success and perseverance in foreign language learning to a large extent depends both on the teacher’s ability to minimize the debilitating effects of classroom anxiety and the learners’ ability to cope with the anxiety that cannot be prevented or avoided” (Melvin & Kenneth, 2009). Teachers should be aware of anxiety-provoking situations and take steps to minimize their negative impact. At the same time, learners may benefit from being explicitly taught how to cope with these situations. Some researches have presented 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. These studies have emphasized that anxiety can be overcome by helping students consider the factors that affect their learning. In other words, if we can help students reduce or overcome that anxiety, it will lead to more engagement.

5.3 Conclusion

The feeling of anxiety in students of language should not be ignored. In that regard, it is suggested that teachers should keep in mind the situations that most commonly provoke anxiety in an attempt to find solutions and strategies to overcome. They should also consider ways they might modify their lesson plans and teaching techniques if anxiety appears to be a problem in their classes. However, teachers should not try to help students get away from anxiety completely because the feeling of anxiety, if it is handled well by teachers, can be utilized as a factor of motivation in students for further practice and study to overcome weakness in learning a new language. Much research indicates that adequate anxiety plays a positive role and can motivate students to maintain their efforts on learning (Williams, 2008:68). Therefore, the teachers' real job is to help students keep adequate anxiety, neither too high nor too low. Besides, every language teacher can offer different ways of reducing language anxiety based upon his/her personal observation of the phenomenon. Teachers need to evaluate their students and the goals of the class to decide what conversational strategies are required and encourage the students to use them.

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