Language learning anxiety in the classroom

**Title:** Language learning anxiety in the classroom.

**Abstract**

Language learning anxiety is a common occurrence in classroom. In this article we will present the common symptoms, underlying causes and subsequent behaviours related to language learning anxiety. Strategies to identify this problem as well as ideas to help students detect the situation, recognize the problem, and react to it are presented in this document. The aim is to offer teachers a tool to prevent and implement measures to lessen the impact of language learning anxiety in the classroom.

**Keywords:** Anxiety, Language Learning, Classroom, Causes, Strategies

**Título:** Ansiedad relacionada con el aprendizaje de idiomas en el aula.

**Resumen**

La ansiedad relacionada con el aprendizaje de idiomas es común en el aula. En este artículo vamos a presentar los síntomas habituales, causas subyacentes y comportamientos relacionados con este tipo de ansiedad. También detallaremos estrategias para identificar este problema, ideas para ayudar a los estudiantes a detectar la situación, reconocer el problema y reaccionar ante el mismo. El objetivo es ofrecer a los docentes una herramienta para prevenir y poner en práctica medidas para reducir el impacto de la ansiedad relacionada con el aprendizaje de idiomas en el aula.

**Palabras clave:** Ansiedad, Aprendizaje de idiomas, Aula, Causas, Estrategias.

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**WHAT IS LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND WHAT ARE THEIR UNDERLYING BELIEFS?**

When a language learning context causes apprehension, fear, stress or extreme worry, we could be experiencing foreign language anxiety. These feelings trigger in its turn physical symptoms related to anxiety: sweat, hyperventilation and difficulty concentrating and processing information, among others. (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey & Daly, 1999).

MacIntyre y Gardner (1989) have described the mechanism that can lead to language learning anxiety. When a student starts learning a new language, he/she might experience many difficulties that can go from being unable to reproduce sounds in the new language to not understanding the new grammar, etc. If the student feels uncomfortable making mistakes or not understanding all aspects of the language, anxiety can appear. When this happens repeatedly, the student starts associating the onset of anxiety with the foreign language and its learning process.

Certain beliefs about language learning also contribute to the student’s tension and frustration in a classroom environment.

- A number of students believe nothing should be said in the foreign language until it can be said correctly and that it is not acceptable to make mistakes or take guesses in foreign language learning. Beliefs such as these produce anxiety as making mistakes is not seen as part of the learning process but as failure. Consequently, fear of failure prevents students from taking any risks and hinders the trial and error process, which is at the base of the language learning process.

- On the other hand, anxious students fear they will not understand all language input and get apprehensive about communication. These students manifest that they get nervous or frightened when they do not understand every word the language teacher says. They believe that in order to have any chance of comprehending the target language message, they must understand every word that is spoken.

- Anxious students also fear being less competent than other students or being negatively evaluated by them. They might worry that they cannot follow the class’s learning pace or feel embarrassed to talk in front of the class while some even report being afraid of being ridiculed when they participate in class.
CONSEQUENCES OF LANGUAGE ANXIETY IN LEARNING AND ATTITUDES

These feelings can have a negative effect both the learning process and on the attitudes shown by students.

CONSEQUENCES IN THE LEARNING PROCESS

Anxiety has shown to have negative influences, on the three stages of cognitive processing: input, processing, and output (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a, 1994; Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, & Daley, 2000).

Tobias (1986) presented a model of the cognitive consequences of anxiety on learning languages in the classroom. In this model, learning is divided into three stages: input, processing, and output. The input stage consists of the individual’s exposure to the situation. If anxiety arises during this stage, repeated exposure to the task may be necessary to overcome the effects of the anxiety. At the processing stage, messages are understood and learning occurs. When anxiety appears at this stage, both second language comprehension and learning may suffer. Finally, during the output stage, spoken or written messages in the second language are produced. Anxiety at this stage may affect retrieval of vocabulary, use of grammar rules, or the ability to respond. Difficulty in speaking in class is probably the most frequently cited concern of the anxious foreign language students. People who typically have trouble speaking in groups are likely to experience even greater difficulty speaking in a foreign language class where they have little control of the communicative situation and their performance is constantly monitored.

Foreign language anxiety also shows up frequently in testing situations. Students commonly report to counselors that they “know” a certain grammar point but “forget” it during a test or an oral exercise when many grammar points must be remembered and coordinated simultaneously. Often, the student realizes, usually some time after the test, that they know the correct answer but put down the wrong one due to nervousness. If the student realizes she or he is making preventable errors during the test, anxiety and errors may escalate. Test-anxiety is often linked to fear of failure. These anxious students often put unrealistic demands on themselves and believe that if the test result is not perfect, it is a failure.

CONSEQUENCES ON THE LEARNING ATTITUDES

As well as having an effect on the learning process, language learning anxiety often has consequences on students’ attitudes in and around class.

Some consequences of this anxiety can be:

1. Anxious students can have a tendency not to attend classes or study to ease their anxiety.
2. Other students can study excessively in order to have a perfect performance every time.
3. A number of students, after receiving a bad mark, may give up altogether, often without checking with their teachers the areas that can be improved and strategies to be followed to maximize their learning process.
4. Another behavior among older students is to question the teacher’s explanations or to show disruptive behavior in the classroom in order to attract negative attention and not have to prove his/her abilities as a foreign language student.
5. Other anxiety-created behaviors can be to try not to be seen or heard, for example, by sitting in the last row or as far away from the teacher as possible, or by asking not to participate in class.

It is not always easy to interpret the cause of the aforementioned behaviors as they all too often are considered stemming from a lack of interest in the class, introversion, lack of motivation, lack of language ability, lack of social ability, or misbehavior. More specific teacher training is needed in these areas to deal with this issue appropriately. To help instructors face these situations, some ideas are presented below.

DEALING WITH ANXIOUS STUDENTS

When dealing with anxious students educators can act in two different fronts:

1) They can help them learn to cope with the existing anxiety provoking situation.
1.1 The first piece of advice could be to encourage students to accept that they are experiencing language learning anxiety. If we accept what we feel and validate our feelings (we do not try to hide them or we feel inadequate about them), we will have more chances of finding a solution for these situations. Try to explain to them that this is a common occurrence that can be addressed and it does not need to be related to language performance.

1.2 Another important message to give students is to cease trying to be perfect. Fear of speaking a foreign language often arises from fear of being imperfect. Learning a language is a long process not devoid of mistakes. In fact, students should know that mistakes are great allies in the learning process. They are a witness to what we already know and point the way to continue learning.

1.3 Good preparation may also increase the learners’ ability. The anxious learners may perform as well as the non-anxious learners when they have sufficient time to prepare and practice the tasks.

1.4 Relief can also come from sharing their fears. It is beneficial to share the experience of anxiety with others. Talking about feelings related to language is useful, since other people may feel relieved to know that they are not the only ones who experience anxiety when using a foreign language, and they can exchange words of advice and reassurance.

1.5 Students should also be encouraged to maintain a positive attitude and not make assumptions about their ability to learn languages, which are normally personal opinions that are not proven. In this respect, students could answer a language learning attitudes questionnaire to learn how their self-image could be affecting their language learning. Reasons for having failed to learn a language in the past can be varied: lack of the optimum conditions in class, lack of encouragement or punitive attitudes, unrealistic expectations, etc. Additionally, students might benefit from setting realistic expectations about their language learning process, for example, setting SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, timely) language goals, which can be checked with the teacher.

1.6 Students can also be given information and advice about the different learning styles and strategies. The term “learning styles” refers to the notion that every student learns differently. An individual’s learning style refers to the best way in which the student absorbs, processes, comprehends, and retains information. These fall into general categories such as information processing, personality patterns, and social interaction (Conner, 2004). There is an extensive amount of literature on this topic but one widely used model is Rebecca Oxford’s classification of learning strategies into six categories:

- Cognitive
- Mnemonic
- Metacognitive
- Compensatory
- Affective
- Social.

2) They can make the learning context less stressful.

   Specific techniques that teachers may use to allay students’ anxiety include relaxation exercises. This can help anxious students overcome their perception of low ability.

   2.1 Teachers can create a friendly classroom atmosphere incorporating group or pair work. This can provide anxious and non-anxious students alike with abundant opportunities to use language in a non-threatening context. At the same time, a task-teaching model is a cooperative, student-focused system that can reduce learning anxiety.
2.2 The layout of the classroom may also affect the students’ interaction. Desk arrangement, which lets the students face one another may contribute to good classroom interaction between students and their teacher as well as between students. This may increase the students’ feeling of belonging, which is crucial because it is the foundation for applying and developing effective learning strategies.

2.3 Error correction. One of the main dilemmas for teachers is error correction. It is always difficult to know when and if to correct students and how to address this issue. Here are a few ideas that could be useful to alleviate students’ anxiety:

- Ask the students how they want to be corrected
- Correction must be clear, not ambiguous
- Correction must protect the personality of the student
- Correction should be adapted to the capacity of the student
- Correction should be adapted to the methodology and objectives of the course

3) Motivational techniques can also play an important part in helping students not feel at odds with the foreign language. Dörnyei (Dörnyei, 2005) wrote the 10 laws for teachers to motivate language students that can be used as a guideline in the language classroom:

1. As a teacher, your behavior should be a model for your students.
2. Create a friendly and relaxed environment in the classroom.
3. Present the learning tasks in a clear way.
4. Maintain good relationships with the students.
5. Increase the self-esteem of the students in the learning process.
6. Make classes interesting and relevant.
7. Promote learners’ autonomy.
8. Personalize the learning process.
9. Advance the learning objectives of the students.
10. Expose students to the culture of the language they are learning.

CONCLUSION

Language learning anxiety is a common problem in foreign language classrooms. More awareness among the educational community is needed as well as opportunities for teacher training in this area. Teachers can be vigilant and try to identify the symptoms of language anxiety in the input, processing, and output stage. They should collect as much information as possible and have a positive impact on these areas by way of implementing preventive measures, detecting possible problems, and implementing solutions. The impact of these measures will be on both the anxious students and their classmates, on a more relaxed environment conducive to better learning, and most likely on the attainment of better results.
References