

Analysis of Classroom Environmental Factors and Teaching Strategies for Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

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Abstract: With the advent of humanistic psychology, there has been an increasing emphasis in English language instruction on the influence of emotional factors on the learning process. Among these factors, anxiety has gained recognition as a prominent affective disorder in the context of language learning. Recognizing the significant detriment caused by "environmental anxiety" to English learners, this paper endeavors to investigate the anxiety arising from various environmental factors within the classroom. Specifically, it examines language anxiety resulting from the teacher-student relationship, peer interaction, and teaching materials. Moreover, this paper provides three recommendations aimed at mitigating anxiety levels in these areas: cultivating a harmonious teacher-student relationship, organizing group activities, and selecting appropriate teaching content. These measures are intended to help educators foster a more conducive learning environment.

Keywords: Foreign Language Learning Anxiety; Factors Analysis; Solutions.

1. Introduction

Drawing upon humanistic teaching theory and second language acquisition theories, it is evident that the learning process is influenced by both cognitive and emotional factors. Among these emotional factors, language anxiety, identified by linguists as a pivotal psychological variable, assumes a significant role. The causes of anxiety can be categorized into internal factors and external factors. Internal factors pertain to enduring and stable attributes of learners, whereas external factors encompass the transient and mutable features induced by the surrounding environment. In contrast to internal factors, the detrimental impact of external factors is more pronounced. This stems not only from the inherent uncertainties and instabilities associated with external factors but also from the potential for these factors to impede the formation of the learners' value system during the foreign language learning process. However, due to their adaptable nature, external factors can be readily manipulated by educators to mitigate learners' anxiety levels by modifying certain extraneous variables.

Investigating the causes of language anxiety in the foreign language classroom situation holds great significance in guiding English language instruction. The causes of language learning anxiety have been extensively studied, encompassing not only subjective factors related to learners, such as gender, age, and self-efficacy but also objective factors including teachers' behavior, instructional methods, peer relationships, and the classroom atmosphere, which cannot be disregarded. Such exploration not only enables teachers to adopt targeted measures to mitigate students' emotional anxiety and facilitate effective language acquisition but also fosters emotional communication between teacher and students. By embracing a "learner-oriented" teaching ideology, foreign language instruction can genuinely prioritize the development of students as the ultimate objective.

2. Problem Identification

2.1. Definition and Classification of FLA

Various researchers have provided different definitions of foreign language anxiety (FLA), encompassing the following types:

Horwitz et al. (1986) defined it as a psychological complex arising from self-perception, belief, emotion, and behavior within the unique context of foreign language learning, particularly in a classroom setting. MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) characterized FLA as a sense of tension, worry, and fear specifically related to the foreign language learning environment. Oxford (1999) highlighted FLA as a key factor influencing bilingual learners and identifies reasons for its occurrence, such as performance on regular assessments, final exam results, self-confidence, and self-esteem in language learning.

In summary, FLA can be understood as a psychological state of tension, anxiety, or fear resulting from the inability to achieve desired goals in foreign language learning. It also encompasses apprehension or unease experienced by learners when utilizing and expressing themselves in the target language.

Regarding the categorization of FLA, scholars both domestically and internationally adopt varying classification criteria. Among them, Horwitz et al.'s (1986) framework provided a comprehensive understanding of the types of anxiety in foreign language learning, emphasizing the importance of communication, test-related factors, and fear of negative evaluation in shaping learners' experiences.

Communication anxiety specifically pertains to the anxiety surrounding the failure to fully comprehend others' messages or effectively express one's own thoughts during verbal communication. Test anxiety is the apprehension and concern associated with the fear of performing poorly on tests. This anxiety arises from the worry that inadequate results in examinations will be met with negative consequences. Fear of negative evaluation encompasses the fear and distress

triggered by the possibility of receiving negative evaluations from others. It refers to students' apprehension about being evaluated by others and their concern about receiving unfavorable judgments.

These three types of anxiety are intricately linked to the environment of foreign language learning. Language acquisition is inherently intertwined with communication and interaction, and it is characterized by periodic tests and evaluations that offer timely feedback on learners' progress. Consequently, it is imperative to investigate the factors within the classroom environment that influence FLLA. Such an exploration enables the implementation of targeted interventions aimed at mitigating or preventing anxiety.

2.2. Factors Affecting FFLA in Classroom Setting

FLLA stems from various factors, extending beyond learner variables such as ability, age, gender, learning style, and personality traits (Domyei & Skehan, 2003). Extensive research by Phillips (1992), Reid (1995), and Young (1999) highlighted that communicative activities, negative classroom experiences, strict teaching styles, and the learning environment itself contribute significantly to learners' anxiety. This paper primarily focuses on analyzing classroom environment factors in foreign language learning, specifically examining the roles of teachers, peers, and learning materials.

2.2.1. Teacher-Student Relationship

The unequal status between teachers and students is a significant factor contributing to students' anxiety. When teachers adopt a superior attitude in their communication with students, it fosters feelings of inferiority and unease (Peirce, 1995). The interpersonal relationship between teachers and students serves as a foundational element in establishing an optimal learning atmosphere. Piassetski (2001) discovered that when teachers display interest in fostering friendly relationships with the entire class, they will respect and appreciate students, which not only alleviates anxiety but also enhances their learning outcomes.

2.2.2. Group Dynamics and Peer Interaction

Group cooperation can serve as a means to stimulate students' learning motivation and reduce student's anxiety level. Bailey et al. (1983) found a strong correlation between peer-oriented learning and the degree of FLLA, with the lowest levels observed when students worked in cooperative peer groups. Research conducted by Clément et al. (1994) demonstrated that student cohesiveness significantly influences interaction and learning in the classroom. A cohesive class group fosters a pleasant and supportive climate that enhances learners' willingness to communicate in the L2.

2.2.3. Instructional Methods and Materials

The difficulty level of materials and the evaluation methods of performance also impact students' anxiety levels. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) proposed that high levels of anxiety are associated with challenging tasks, particularly when English is being learned as a second language. In addition, the manner in which activities are assessed can influence learners' motivation and anxiety levels. Jones (2004) pointed out that the humiliation from the teacher or scrutiny from peers may lead to the fear of making mistakes and can negatively impact learners' communication. Therefore, negative or even critical evaluation has the potential to dampen learners' enthusiasm, contributing to the development or escalation of FLLA.

3. Problem Solutions

3.1. Building Harmonious Teacher-Student Relationship and Establishing Positive Psychological Interaction

Educators must create a secure and inclusive learning environment, wherein they actively participate alongside students throughout the entire learning process, encouraging and supporting them in overcoming challenges. When engaging in establishing a relationship of equitable communication, it is essential to avoid insulting, threatening, comparative, and conclusive language (Miao Qian, 2023). Furthermore, according to Hu Xiaohong (2018), language educators should fortify their knowledge of psychological science in order to comprehend the psychological traits and emotional patterns exhibited by students. Consequently, they can ascertain the anxiety levels of individual students and adopt tailored approaches, providing timely intervention and support to mitigate language anxiety. Such an approach fosters a positive psychological dynamic between the teacher and students.

3.2. Setting up Group Activities Appropriately and Managing the Balance between Competition and Cooperation

Group cooperation and competition generates a sense of belonging while also inducing a moderate level of nervousness among students (Zeng Ni & Tian Xiaohong, 2014). Cooperative learning, conducted within a lively and harmonious atmosphere, enables students to alleviate the psychological burden and foster enhanced self-confidence. However, it is important to recognize that students possess their own preferences and beliefs regarding classroom activities, especially for those who are introverted or less confident. Consequently, teachers should judiciously arrange group activities based on individual differences and the specific learning context. During group activities, educators should maintain a keen awareness that each student's performance warrants comprehensive consideration. The value of each individual should be acknowledged, and timely feedback on both strengths and weaknesses ought to be delivered.

3.3. Carefully Choosing Learning Materials according to Students' Cognitive Levels

If the difficulty level of a learning task surpasses students' language proficiency, it can undermine their language confidence and give rise to varying degrees of anxiety during the learning process. According to Krashen's input theory, comprehensible input forms the core premise of language acquisition. Therefore, teachers should ensure that the learning content is readily understandable to students while being slightly more challenging than their current language abilities, which not only avoids overwhelming students with excessive pressure but also stimulates their curiosity, driving their intellectual growth. Consequently, teachers need to assess the students' current proficiency levels accurately and tailor their instruction accordingly. Furthermore, teachers should prioritize the diversity of teaching materials to cater to the cognitive styles of different students, which enhances the quality of language input and effectively reduce FLLA.

4. Conclusion

Foreign language learning anxiety is a complex phenomenon that can have detrimental effects on learners, impacting their motivation, self-esteem, and overall language proficiency. However, by establishing positive teacher-student relationship, incorporating learner-centered activities and designing a well-structured curriculum aligned with appropriate learning goals, educators can significantly mitigate anxiety and create an optimal learning environment for language learners.

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