

The Utilization of Anxiety in Foreign Language Learning: From the Perspective of POA

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Abstract: The relationship between anxiety and foreign language learning is investigated from the angle of physiology, emotion and behavior firstly. At one extreme, anxiety is detrimental to foreign language learning, as acknowledged conventionally. At the other end of the spectrum, moderate anxiety, to certain degree, do good to language learning. Then, some teaching suggestions are proposed from the perspective of production-oriented approach for the purpose of leveraging facilitating anxiety while avoiding debilitating anxiety.

Keywords: Anxiety; Foreign Language Learning; Relationship; Utilization; Production-Oriented Approach.

1. Introduction

With the continuous development of psychology as a science to study human thinking and behavior, relevant research scope has gradually expanded and penetrated into all aspects of human psychological activities, especially the research on anxiety. Anxiety not only originates from the individual's internal psychological process, but also is deeply affected by external factors. In the field of education, anxiety has gradually become an important topic in the cross research of psychology and pedagogy. With the introduction and elaboration of the concept of foreign language learning anxiety, researchers began to pay much attention to the specific effects of anxiety on foreign language learning. Opinions vary on the influence of anxiety on learning. Hence, this paper will delve into the influence of anxiety and the traits of foreign language learning, giving a glimpse into the relationship between anxiety and foreign language learning. Then, under the guidance of production-oriented approach, especially its teaching procedures, some teaching suggestions are put forward, hoping to make the best use of anxiety in foreign language learning in preference to losing sight of its facilitating function in advancing students' learning efficiency, and or taking such one-size-fits-all measures as avoiding anxiety completely and blindly.

2. Key Concepts

Prior to the discussion about the relationship between anxiety and learning performance, it is of great necessity to give a clear and lucid definition of related concepts that will be discussed about later to avoid possible ambiguity. The key concepts here are foreign language learning anxiety, learning performance, and Production-Oriented Approach (hereafter POA), which will be elucidated respectively.

2.1. Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

A widely-accepted consensus is that anxiety is a psychological state in which individuals worry that they will not be able to achieve their goals or overcome obstacles, that their self-esteem and self-confidence will be undermined or that feelings of failure and guilt will increase, resulting in feelings of tension and anxiety[17]. To elaborate, it is one thing to have an expectation, but it is quite another to make it.

One has a desire to obtain a goal, while at the same time, he realizes his own incapability to achieve the goal, which may give rise to the impairment of self-esteem and self-confidence. Learning anxiety is the emotional response of a student who worries about a specific learning outcome that poses a threat to their self-esteem and sense of worth, either real or expected, during the learning process.

Language learning anxiety is a kind of self-perception, belief, emotion and behavior complex related to foreign language learning due to the uniqueness of the process of foreign language learning. It is a kind of fear or unease that learners have when they need to express themselves in the target language[9]. Put it in a simpler way, foreign language anxiety, hyponymous to anxiety, refers specifically to fear or anxiety that learners feel when learning or expressing themselves in a foreign language. There are an array of factors that light the fuse to the occurrence of foreign language anxiety, arranging from endogenous factors to exogenous factor, such as self-recognition, the difficulty of learning tasks[9], previous experience, teachers' teaching style[17] and so on. Language learning anxiety is mainly manifested as communication anxiety, exam anxiety, negative evaluation anxiety and class anxiety[19]. Here in this paper, the class anxiety is mainly discussed, namely the kind of anxiety that learners have during the foreign language class, such as their reluctance to speak in English, and fear of making mistakes.

2.2. Learning Performance

Learning performance can be defined as the measurable outcomes and observable behaviors that result from an individual's engagement in learning activities, reflecting their ability to acquire, retain, apply, analyze, and synthesize knowledge, skills, and attitudes in a given context or environment. It encompasses not just the acquisition of factual information but also the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability skills that contribute to effective learning and personal growth. In this paper, as the anxiety examined here is class anxiety, learning performance mainly refers to learners' participation in learning activities and their learning efficiency in the class.

2.3. Production-Oriented Approach

Evolving from Output-driven Hypothesis and then Output-driven, Input-enabled Hypothesis proposed by Wen Qiufang

before, the Production-Oriented Approach is an innovative pedagogy with Chinese characteristics put forward and improved in collaboration of a research team led by Wen Qiufang in the year 2015. According to Wen Qiufang[17], POA consists of three main parts, namely teaching principles, teaching hypotheses, and teaching procedures. To combat the learning-using separation and enhance teaching efficiency, three principles were created, namely learning-centered principle, learning-using integrated principle, and whole-person principle. Absorbing the merits of Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis, POA developed output-driven hypothesis, input-enabled hypothesis, and selective-learning hypothesis. As for the teaching procedures, classes are supposed to be carried out in align with motivating, enabling, and assessing, during which the role of teachers should be strengthened to facilitate students' learning.

The first phase of POA is motivating. The teacher firstly presents a scenario of communicative value, and then students try out the productive activity in the scenario, and finally the teacher explains teaching objectives and the productive tasks. Through motivating, students can realize their deficiencies and thus their learning desire will be ignited. Enabling is the second phase of POA, by which students are equipped with necessary and relevant knowledge for achieving productive activities. After the teacher describes the productive tasks, students choose useful materials provided by the teacher to learn, and then students practice productive activities. The last phase is assessing. Professor Wen proposed teacher-student collaborative assessment (TSCA) to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of assessment. Before class, the teacher selects some typical samples to assess based on the learning objectives. In class, the teacher and students modify these writing samples collaboratively. After class, the students revise their products based on the teacher's professional guidance offered in class.

POA, as investigated by a proliferation of researchers in foreign language teaching, is an effective teaching approach in promoting the efficiency of foreign language teaching, be it English reading teaching or English writing teaching. Apart from its effectiveness in language knowledge teaching, some researchers also explored its function in alleviating anxiety in language learning. For instance, Liqi[10] conducted a study to examine the influence of POA on Chinese learning anxiety of foreign students, and then discovered that POA can significantly reduce learners' overall classroom anxiety and task anxiety, enhancing students' class participation and sense of achievement, and improving students' learning self-confidence and task-producing effect. Besides, in the sphere of English learning, Huo Wenhua[5] proved the effectiveness of POA in mitigating college students' English oral speaking anxiety.

In conclusion, POA, boasting teaching principles, teaching hypotheses, and teaching procedures, is not only an effective teaching approach in foreign language teaching, but also has the advantage of doing good to assuaging learning anxiety. For one thing, the motivating phase of POA creates an authentic scenario of using English, giving learners the sense of urgency to learn the language well. For another, the enabling procedure of POA helps to reduce learners' extremely high anxiety by equipping them with necessary knowledge needed in performing productive tasks. The joint effort of motivating and enabling make it possible to minimize the adverse effect of anxiety on learners, while maximizing the positive role of anxiety in igniting learners'

learning motivation.

3. The Relationship between Anxiety and Learning Performance

A bewildering amount of researchers have investigated the relationship between anxiety and learning performance. A long-held assumption among researchers is that anxiety exerts an adverse influence on learning, be it language learning or other kinds of learning. However, delving deeper into the domain of anxiety, it does not take a genius to figure out that anxiety is a mixed blessing for learning. It would be both a catastrophe for and a boon to learning, depending on our management. Put it another way, the relationship between anxiety and learning can be demonstrated as an inverted U-shaped curve[15]. To elaborate, there is an optimal level of anxiety that maximizes learning efficiency.

At the bottom of the inverted U-shaped curve, anxiety level is very low, during which learners may experience a lack of motivation, focus, or engagement, leading to a low-efficient learning process because it does not provide sufficient drive or urgency to engage in learning tasks actively and effectively. Without a certain degree of anxiety or tension, students may find it difficult to remain concentrated or motivated to learn new knowledge and take part in classroom activities. As anxiety level increases, moving up the left side of the inverted U, it can initially enhance learning efficiency. Moderate levels of anxiety can function as a stimulant, improving alertness, concentration, and the ability to process information more efficiently. This heightened state of arousal can galvanize learners to submerge themselves in learning activities, contributing to better learning performance.

However, as anxiety level continues to rise, exceeding the optimal point on the curve, it begins to act as a detrimental force for learning. High levels of anxiety can incur such negative feelings as overwhelming stress, distraction, and even panic, which further interfere with cognitive processes such as memorization, attention, and problem-solving[9]. Excessive anxiety can cause the mind to race, making it nearly impossible to concentrate or retain information. What's more, it can also give rise to physiological responses like increased heart rate and sweating, which further impede the learning process.

In a nutshell, the inverted U-shaped curve illustrates that learning efficiency is directly proportional to anxiety before the optimal point, and inversely proportional to anxiety after the optimal point. That is to say, while too much anxiety becomes detrimental, hindering cognitive functioning and ultimately reducing learning efficiency, moderate anxiety can do good to learning process by increasing arousal and motivation. According to Zhangsong and Zhang Deshan[21], anxiety can be manifested in three aspects: physiology, emotion and behavior, with positive or negative consequence. Therefore, the debilitating and facilitating role of anxiety on foreign language learning will be discussed from the angle of physiology, emotion and behavior respectively.

3.1. Debilitating Role

The long-held assumption about anxiety is that it gets in the way of learning. Such researchers as Ren, YY[14], Zhang, GJ[19], England, BJ & Brigati, JR & Schussler, EE & Chen, MM[2], Li Chengchen[6] at home and abroad all arrived at the conclusion that anxiety has the potential to hinder learning process.

From the physical perspective, anxiety induces a multitude of physical responses like headache, digestive issues, poor sleep quality, rapid heartbeat, and so on[7]. Prolonged periods of anxiety can trigger headaches or even migraines, which not only cause intense pain but also impair cognitive function, making it challenging to focus on learning materials. At the same time, anxiety frequently disrupts the digestive system, leading to symptoms such as nausea, stomach aches, diarrhea, or constipation. These discomforts can distract students from their studies and reduce their overall energy levels. More seriously, in moments of high anxiety, the body's fight-or-flight response is activated, leading to a rapid heartbeat, increased blood pressure, and sometimes shortness of breath. These physical sensations can be overwhelming and distracting, hindering concentration and learning abilities.

From the angle of emotion, anxiety brings on such emotional manifestations as fear and avoidance, lack of confidence, loss of motivation and interest. First of all, anxiety can create a fear of failure or negative evaluation, leading students to avoid challenging academic situations or tasks they perceive as risky. This avoidance behavior can limit opportunities for growth and mastery. Besides, anxiety fosters self-doubt and undermines self-confidence. Students may question their abilities, doubt their intelligence, and believe they are incapable of succeeding academically. This negative self-talk can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, impairing learning performance. What's more, prolonged anxiety can erode motivation and interest in learning. Students may feel disengaged from their studies, lose enthusiasm for academic pursuits, and struggle to find meaning or purpose in their educational journey.

In the behavioral domain, the adverse effect of anxiety on language learning can be demonstrated as procrastination, avoidance of interactions and eye-contact, fear of making mistakes. Students haunted by anxiety may be prone to procrastination, delaying starting or completing tasks due to feelings of overwhelm, fear of failure, or a perfectionist mindset that prevents them from beginning imperfectly. Students may also avoid taking part in class discussions, group projects, or even attending classes altogether, fearing judgment or embarrassment. This social isolation can further exacerbate feelings of anxiety and loneliness. Apart from those, the typical characteristics in foreign language learning can manifest as altered pronunciation, difficulty in grasping the tone and rhythm of the language, stiffness in one's seat when answering questions, frequently forgetting newly learned words and phrases, or reluctance to speak and maintaining silence[4]. What's worse, some students, driven by reluctance and disgust to learn the language, even play truant, which incur criticism from parents and teachers, leading to sheer fear and ill feelings towards language learning.

3.2. Facilitating Role

However, every coin has two sides. And anxiety is no different. While anxiety is universally regarded as an unwelcome mindset by most psychoanalysts and psychiatrists, research findings from numerous psychologists indicate that not all anxiety is necessarily negative[21]. Despite the fact that excessive anxiety gets in the way of efficient learning, it is extremely difficult for one to learn a foreign language well without anxiety[12]. That is to say, when controlled within a reasonable level, namely before the optimal point in the inverted U-shaped curve, anxiety can contribute to the

process of language learning.

From the physical perspective, anxiety can serve as a stimulation on cognitive processes and physiological responses. A compelling example is that moderate anxiety can heighten learners' level of arousal, resulting in increased alertness and focus. This heightened state of attention allows learners to process information more efficiently and retain it better. Existing researches have indicated that a moderate level of stress hormones can facilitate memory encoding and consolidation[9]. Besides, anxiety, when recognized positively, can serve as a source of motivation and drive. It pushes learners to work harder, persist longer, and strive for excellence, helping learners in overcoming obstacles and achieving academic goals.

From the angle of emotion, anxiety has the advantage of incurring sense of fulfillment. When learners successfully navigate through anxiety-inducing situations, such as exams or difficult assignments, they often experience a sense of fulfillment and pride, reinforcing their self-confidence and belief in their abilities, which can further fuel their motivate to continue learning and pushing their boundaries. Besides, managing anxiety effectively requires emotional intelligence, the ability to understand and regulate one's own emotions and those of others. As learners develop strategies to cope with anxiety, they also enhance their emotional intelligence. This skill can be invaluable in academic settings, where interpersonal relationships and emotional resilience are just as important as intellectual abilities.

In the behavioral domain, moderate anxiety can encourage learners to participate actively in classroom discussions, ask questions, and engage with the learning material. They may feel a sense of urgency to understand the concepts being taught and therefore seek out opportunities to clarify their doubts and deepen their understanding. It can also motivate learners to put in extra effort and persist in the face of challenges. They may spend more time studying, seeking out additional resources, and engaging in activities that enhance their understanding of the subject matter.

In conclusion, the relationship between anxiety and foreign language learning can be demonstrated as an inverted U-shaped curve. Anxiety is not a mere catastrophe for foreign learning. It does have driving force for language learning. What we are supposed to do is exploring effective approaches to taking advantage of its facilitating role while avoiding its debilitating role.

4. Strategies for Utilizing the Facilitating Role of Anxiety

Given that anxiety is a blessing in disguise, boasting both drawbacks and benefits for language learners, it is advisable for language educators to explore effective approaches to taking advantages of the facilitating role of anxiety while diminishing its debilitating role, in preference to scolding the drawbacks of anxiety only, abandoning anxiety completely. At the same time, POA is an effective teaching approach not only in foreign language teaching, but also in alleviating learning anxiety. Hence, foreign language teachers can carry out teaching activities in line with the teaching procedures of POA, namely motivating, enabling, and assessing, and take measures accordingly to obtain a moderate anxiety among learners.

4.1. Motivating

Creating a "problem situation" in the classroom is a good way for teachers to create moderate anxiety and arouse students' curiosity[13]. Therefore, in the motivating phase, a scenario of communicative value is created firstly to arouse students' learning interest and make them recognize the importance of English learning. Then, students try their best to practice the productive tasks. By experiencing a scenario that entails necessary English knowledge, and trying out productive tasks, students' deficiency will be revealed, thus their learning desire will be stimulated. However, only by creating a learning environment that is low-pressure, non-threatening, and supportive can we reduce learners' anxiety, enhance their self-confidence, and improve the overall level of foreign language courses[7]. Hence, it is incumbent on teachers to create a scenario of communicative value without giving students' too much anxiety. At this time, teachers can create a relaxing and cheerful atmosphere with the help of multimedia, because multimedia is conducive to stimulate students' learning interest[20].

4.2. Enabling

The enabling is an indispensable procedure in the whole teaching process, in which teachers guide students to learn necessary knowledge needed for carrying out productive tasks. Equipped with such leaning materials as content, language, and structure, the prospect of getting anxious will be ground down by a large margin. Yet, a magnitude of studies reveal that anxiety lies mainly in students' incapability to understand input materials[11]. In this instance, an advisable way for teachers is to carry out needs analysis to solicit objective and subjective information about students for the purpose of designing tailored learning tasks and gearing learning activities towards students' learning proficiency and tastes[1]. At the same time, multimodal listening and speaking instruction can effectively alleviate students' anxiety in oral communication[15]. Therefore, on the basis of needs analysis, teachers are suggested to exploit multimodal teaching tools as more as they can so as to scaffold students' understanding of the knowledge, thereby diminish anxiety resulted from difficulties in understanding input materials.

4.3. Assessing

In the assessing phase, the teacher presents the criteria of assessment, points out the focus of the assessment and guides students understand the criteria. Then, the teacher and students assess one or more samples in collaboration. Teachers should utilize assessment to maintain a certain level of moderate anxiety among students[13]. What should be paid special attention to is that students, even adult students, prefer teachers to use more positive feedback[3]. Therefore, it is advisable for teachers to adopt appropriate assessing methods, avoiding negative evaluation which may exert a detrimental effect on students' self-confidence and self-esteem.

5. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the relationship between anxiety and foreign language learning performance can be illustrated as an inverted U-shaped curve. Being excessively anxious can be detrimental to one's learning performance. However, moderate anxiety, to some degree, is a boon to one's learning performance. Therefore, teachers, with the help of POA, can employ some effective means to juggle with the adverse and

positive influence of anxiety on language learning, and strike a balance between them.

However, in this paper, there is a lack of measurement of anxiety and learning performance by adopting such subjective methods as issuing questionnaires and conducting interviews, and objective methods as observing facial cues, recording heart rate variability. Hence, further studies can carry out teaching experiments to verify the effectiveness of POA in maximizing the facilitating influence of anxiety and minimizing the debilitating effect of anxiety on foreign language learning performance.

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