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SOME ASPECTS OF ANXIETY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND VERBAL COMMUNICATION

ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to shed some supplementary light on possible causes of anxiety in foreign language learning and actual communication; it also considers ways of preventing and coping with it.

KEYWORDS: language, anxiety, communication, learning, affect

STRESZCZENIE

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie dodatkowych informacji wyjaśniających zjawisko lęku występującego w procesie uczenia się języka obcego i w rzeczywistej komunikacji językowej. Ponadto, sugeruje możliwe sposoby zapobiegania i radzenia sobie z lękiem.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: język, lęk, komunikacja, uczenie się, afekt

Although anxiety is commonly perceived as omnipresent in foreign language learning, it has probably not received substantial or sufficient attention in research. Particularly, its specific kind, viz. *foreign language classroom anxiety*, which is sometimes isolated and distinguished from other forms of communication anxiety, seems not to have been given adequate attention which it certainly deserves. In an earlier article (Zybert 2006) I endeavoured to scrutinize how students experience anxiety in the foreign language classroom; however, the present paper is an attempt to ruminate on:

- i) some background aspects of anxiety that possibly have not been treated with proper attention,
- ii) its sources or reasons (especially when related to personal past experiences),
- iii) potential ways of coping with it.

Moreover, it considers likely ways of preventing further occurrence of verbal communication anxiety. This is to help the teacher understand what circumstances or situations may actually be conducive to learner anxiety, especially with relation to individual cases, in order to take adequate precautions.

The undoubtedly detrimental role of anxiety in foreign language learning has gained substantial recognition due to what is generally considered devastating impact on the learning process and on the learner's psychological comfort. This recognition coincided in the past with developments in humanistic and cognitive psychology which documented the existence of a strong connection between emotions and various aspects of language learning. This interest has found its manifestation in a number of innovative teaching methods and approaches (e.g. *Suggestopedia*, *Community Language Learning*, *Natural Approach*, *TPR*, *Callan Method*, etc.). These were recommended for their alleged naturalness and thus were taken to be procedures preventing or at least not evoking stress. Consequently, it has been commonly agreed that emotions have to be seriously taken into account in language pedagogy – researchers have pointed out that emotions can both facilitate and debilitate the learning process, even if they are not causal. For example, Krashen (1982) has maintained that it is the levels of certain variables, such as motivation or self-esteem, that determine the learning outcomes: high levels promote learning, low levels restrain it. At the same time, low self-esteem and excessive anxiety usually combine and effectively raise the affective filter – therefore, they can form a mental block. As a result, it forms a psychological barrier that prevents input data from being used for language acquisition.

Admittedly, some claims, even if they recognize the importance of affective factors, do contain some reservations about their impact on language learning; e.g. Scovel (2000: 140) admits that

they could very well end up being the most influential force in language acquisition, but SLA researchers have not even come close to demonstrating such a claim. A large part of the problem is the wide variety of constructs that are subsumed under the term emotions (...), affective variables are the area that SLA researchers understand the least.

Nonetheless, the currently used concept of so-called “feeling orientation” has stimulated research effectively and resulted in a considerable number of publications devoted to individual differences (e.g. Arnold 2005; Dörnyei 2005; Pavlenko 2006; Piechurska-Kuciel 2008). They indicate that one of the obvious aims of SLA research is to pinpoint factors that determine learning processes and to define their role in these processes. Since the effects of language learning depend to a large extent on the learners themselves, research does concern, among other things, the impact of individual factors on learning effects. One of these is just that of anxiety, which has been recognised and labelled with terms such as stage fright, speech anxiety, communication apprehension, reticence, or social anxiety – used to describe the affective states that interfere with communication (cf. Daly 1991: 3). A very specific type of anxiety can be singled out that is related to speech communication: it is, simply, *communication anxiety* experienced by students in language classes and in actual communicative encounters outside classrooms which occurs when individuals avoid speaking for a number of reasons. It has been defined as “the abnormally

high and debilitating fear associated with real or anticipated communication with one or more persons” (McCroskey 1991: 129). Classroom language learning can often be anxiety-conducive since it may involve taking risks, especially when a student is forced to speak.

It is worth remembering that in early research on anxiety various other words were used to describe the phenomenon (fear, fright, apprehension, stress, panic) and three types of it were distinguished: trait anxiety (a personality feature), state anxiety (caused by an emotional condition), and situational anxiety (caused by a specific situation) (cf. Scovel 1978). Foreign language learning anxiety is undoubtedly of the situational type. It arrives on the scene during the learner’s attempts to communicate in a foreign language, particularly in the classroom, in reaction to everything that occurs in it and in connection with it. It is understood as a specific nervous tension triggered by a situation in which the learner is expected or, worse, forced to speak in the presence of a group of people (cf. Horwitz et al. 1986). Researchers have offered other explanations/definitions of language anxiety. For example, according to Horwitz et al. (1986: 128), anxiety is “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process”, whereas Gardner and MacIntyre (1993: 5) perceive it as “the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient”. Actually, a situation in which a learner is expected to speak a language he is not proficient in deprives him of the instrument that allows him to function normally and so menaces his identity. All that is written above allows us to conclude that anxiety is regarded as a remarkably destructive psychological factor in foreign language learning. Arnold and Brown (2005: 8) maintain that anxiety is “possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process”. On the whole, what most opinions share is their relatedness to speaking in the language being learnt.

The discomfort and embarrassment experienced in verbal communication are clearly invoked by the learner’s linguistic inability to express his intended meanings, which he is aware of. Additionally, this is connected with the feeling of helplessness derived from the fear of being perceived as an incompetent and ignorant person. Bailey (1996) notes that anxious learners feel communication apprehension, i.e. they usually feel uncomfortable while speaking in public even in their native language; this feeling is, naturally, much greater if performance is in a foreign language.

Communication in a foreign language can also be disturbed due to two psychological barriers: language shock and cultural-linguistic discord. Language shock is typically experienced when a FL learner attempts to communicate in the natural FL linguistic setting, i.e. while abroad. Consequently, the awareness of one’s communicative deficiency develops feelings of frustration and helplessness resulting from the disorientation caused by a lack of knowing how to behave in an unfamiliar linguistic and cultural setting. The shock must logically be attributed to their scanty

knowledge and understanding of the target culture. This situation is not discussed here, though, as it does not pertain to the theme. However, the other phenomenon, cultural-linguistic discord is relevant in that every individual is shaped in his/her own native living environment and becomes somehow “programmed” culturally. According to Festinger (1962), our attitudes toward the values of other individuals are generally negative and usually rejected. Therefore intercultural differences cause communication dilemmas and the unfamiliarity with the target culture becomes a source of insecurity and anxiety. The emerging dissonance generates a peculiar mental discomfort that is probably well known to many language learners and is experienced particularly when they are forced to publicly communicate in the foreign language.

Mere observation shows that some students are more susceptible to develop anxiety than others and experience this emotion to varying degrees. Those that are vulnerable can worry about things that seem quite irrelevant to teachers. Students thus need to be aware of their own emotions and understand them¹. Controlling one’s emotions enables achieving emotional comfort, which is a highly important aspect of the learning process. On the other hand, inability to handle one’s emotions results in emotional vulnerability exhibited in small resilience to emotional problems. Needless to say, helping students to learn how to understand and handle their emotions is crucial and necessary for their emotional wellbeing. The claim that emotions must necessarily be taken into account in actual language teaching seems obvious since their impact on the learning process is undeniably very pervasive and strong.

When confronted with threatening situations, anxiety can manifest itself in one’s insecure behaviour in a number of ways. Furthermore, it is also often claimed that anxiety follows from an inferiority complex². Psychological literature provides plentiful interesting descriptions of anxiety to substantiate the claim that it is not necessarily a symptom of a clinical case but rather a temporary emotional state which is brought about by noticing a threatening stimulus. This provokes a physiological response: the response itself, when consciously realized and analyzed, evokes the emotional state of anxiety. This kind of understanding of anxiety is characteristic of present-day cognitive psychology, which interprets emotions as derivative of self-perceptions and ways of interpreting emotions.

Cognitive psychology points out that the genetic endowment of an individual may predispose him/her to develop particular emotional states. However, apart from that, relevant psychological research provides substantial evidence to show that disturbances in the development of the nervous system normally lead to

¹ This seems to be linked to emotional intelligence, which includes self-awareness, motivation, and particularly empathy reflected in the capacity of a person to perceive, comprehend and handle his emotions and relate them to others.

² Such information can be important to the teacher as it may induce her empathy and compassion for the learner and affect her rapport with students – this is why it is included in the questionnaire (cf. App.).

hyperactivity on the one hand, or to heightened susceptibility to anxiety on the other. As mentioned earlier, anxiety is characteristic of individuals whose primeval sense of security has deteriorated following various traumatic events that took place earlier in their lives. Such events influence emotionality acutely, especially if experienced early in the development of one's personality. The strongest ones include, above all, distressing separation from loved ones – typically, lack or insufficient contact with (a) parent(s) and/or, particularly, their death. Dramatic incidents affect the development of personality and shape specific attitudes towards one's own potential when viewed in relation to the prospective achievement of set goals. Moreover, research has also revealed that there is a significant relationship between certain physiological/somatic syndromes and anxiety; among those identified the most frequent are hyperthyroidism³ and the diseases affecting the respiratory and circulatory systems. Interestingly, it has also been found that some mild stimulants, such as tea and coffee, are often not tolerated by people exhibiting anxiety. However, from the pedagogic point of view the question remains whether all these findings concern foreign language learning. It is particularly important to find if it is true that language anxiety occurs among a considerable number of learners, especially when they are expected to speak the foreign language during language lessons.

Considering the issue from a different angle it can be assumed that anxiety is closely related to brainwaves. As is known, six basic kinds of brainwave corresponding to the states of one's consciousness have been distinguished. They are marked with the first six letters of the Greek alphabet: alpha, beta, gamma, delta, theta, and epsilon. Brainwaves are characterized by two parameters: frequency, measured in Hz (cycles per second – cps) and amplitude, measured in microvolts (μV). Of particular interest here are the first two. Alpha waves (8 to 12 Hz) represent the brain in the resting state. They secure general mental organization, calmness, and attentiveness; they provide good cognitive possibilities and opportunities for acquiring new knowledge; they also provide relaxation of a high quality and mind/body balance. Being in the alpha state, the mind breaks free from the external reality and thus has better access to our unconscious resources. Conversely, beta waves (12 to 38 Hz) are emitted during the normal vigilant state of consciousness – generally, we are outer-directed then: we concentrate on daily tasks, sensory perception and mental activity. Within the frequency range three bands of beta waves are distinguished: beta 1 (12–15 Hz), beta 2 (15–22 Hz), and beta 3 (22–38 Hz). It is very likely that beta 3 waves co-occur with high anxiety or excitement; it follows that much high frequency processing is not fruitful for the brain, as it requires a great amount of effort.

³ According to Wikipedia, hyperthyroidism is the condition caused by excessive production of thyroid hormone (responsible for regulation of metabolism). Symptoms vary and may include irritability, sleeping problems, fast heartbeat, etc.

With regard to the influence of emotions on foreign language learning (FLL) processes, at least two pedagogical goals of relevant research need to be considered, namely: how to overcome problems generated by negative emotions (i.e. anxiety) and how to instigate positive emotions (e.g. motivation).

The emotional state of a learner undoubtedly influences his/her attitude toward the surrounding reality. Certainly, a language lesson is a reality in which the learner's involvement and ability to focus on learning tasks and classroom activities depend significantly on whether he/she feels secure and free from any kind of apprehension. It follows that the so-called language learning anxiety is an affective factor that the individual has to cope with as it, certainly, has a detrimental influence on the process of language learning, particularly on the development of speaking skills and on motivation for language learning altogether. The learner's awareness of his/her insufficient linguistic means to afford meaningful and fluent communication makes it not only difficult for him/her to behave naturally, but often overwhelms him/her completely. Language learning entails determining language rules and patterns from actual usage and involves remembering utterances (produced and heard). It follows that attention to input and output is crucial for language acquisition, as it controls the outcomes of learning. Thus, conscious and intentional attention to certain aspects of language (especially focus on form) is required to facilitate learning and making it effective. Anxiety distracts attention and, in consequence, inhibits the learning process. Moreover, it also leads to lowering one's self-esteem and deprives one of assertiveness. Therefore, it is assumed that a better understanding of the nature and effect of anxiety on learning should enhance both teaching and learning⁴. Contemporary psychology assumes that anxiety is a phenomenon which results from the individual's loss of his/her primeval sense of security. In its most acute form anxiety may result even in the learner's occasional inability to speak⁵. The unwillingness to engage in verbal interaction is often noticeable when learners are aware of their lack of lexical and/or grammatical competence. For example, in another publication (Zybert 2013) I demonstrated that communication anxiety can easily stem from learners' recognition of their unskilled use of the interrogative construction in English. Polish users of English have problems differentiating between the structure of yes/no and wh- questions. Syntactically, these can be identical in the Polish language while differing only in their intonation contour. Hence, Poles are inclined to ask English wh- questions in the indicative with a rising tone. Yet, their awareness of their incompetence in this area often leads to what is stated above in this paragraph (cf. footnote below). This is noticeable particularly among educated adults. It is argued that the truly skilled use of the interrogative skill "strengthens learners' self-confidence and self-esteem; high

⁴ Learners themselves acknowledge that they feel worried and frustrated in anxiety-provoking situations even though they normally do not experience anxiety in their everyday lives.

⁵ This phenomenon is called lathophobic aphasia and is used to refer to the condition of being struck dumb by the fear of making mistakes.

levels of these affective factors indisputably reduce students' language speaking anxiety and encourage them to participate in discourse. Apart from enhancing one's speaking skill, this simultaneously increases learners' motivation for language learning" (Zybert 2013: 235–236), while the findings from the concurrent research support the above claim (Zybert 2013).

The loss of emotional wellbeing is usually caused by some painful experience in an individual's life, typically in childhood, and the trauma associated with it may reside within them to varying degrees for years, if not throughout their lifetime. If someone was doing feebly at school in his/her foreign language studies, anxiety may extend easily later in a variety of linguistic experiences; students that had bad experiences at school are likely to be fearful, insecure, and anxious. Their insecurity is clearly seen in their being either slow to answer questions or very, if not totally, reluctant to participate orally in class activities. These students admit that they feel uncomfortable and anxious. Therefore, forcing them to openly participate is an obvious and unforgivable pedagogic sin that should never be committed. In this situation it is the teacher's friendly support that is imperative when giving them a new task to do and to maintain motivation and to instil assertive feelings with regard to their potential. This is feasible in a climate that is filled with encouragement and understanding and where the teacher is sensitive, empathetic, and trustworthy. It can easily be achieved when the idea of wait-time (cf. Allwright and Bailey 1991: 107) and humour are implemented in language lessons.

The facts mentioned above and the learning aspects discussed show convincingly that language lessons are the most efficient when they are conducted in a relaxed atmosphere, which is achieved when the learner's mind is introduced into the alpha state – this is exactly what some foreign language teaching methods are based on, particularly *Suggestopedia*.

It is clear then that peace of mind is crucial to achievement. It follows that language teachers should be cautious in their work with students with regard to the difficulty and complexity of tasks given to students. If the tasks are too easy, lower expectations will be developed on the part of the student, thus producing the so called *Golem effect* (Mitchell and Daniels 2003); according to this, lower expectations lead to weaker performance (apart from evoking the student's boredom and frustration). Consequently, it is recommended that teachers should give students more challenging tasks⁶, as these create higher expectations resulting from the *Pygmalion effect*⁷. By this phenomenon students internalize their affirmative beliefs, become more assertive and, consequently, succeed accordingly. In a sense the two effects can be viewed as kinds of self-fulfilling prophecies (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968; Whiteley et al. 2012).

⁶ Actually, this corresponds to Krashen's Input Hypothesis (i + 1).

⁷ The Pygmalion effect refers to the situation in which higher expectations cause better performance.

The conviction regarding the crucial and positive role of the relaxed state of mind (alpha waves) on the efficiency of learning is, evidently, widely accepted; likewise, the perception of learning tasks in terms of their relative ease/difficulty is also generally seen as affecting the learning process. Tasks perceived as easy do not require effort and so they do not motivate further work; on the other hand, too difficult tasks will discourage and, actually, demotivate from further work – consequently, both cases disturb the student’s state of mind.

The above stated opinion is not questioned. However, it seems worth researching the influence of the classroom atmosphere and students’ attitudes to learning tasks upon their achievement. The first issue is connected with the brain emitting alpha waves – there are many factors that are responsible for this (the most important ones are considered in the questionnaire (see Appendix [what makes you relaxed: music, rapport with teacher, classmates, etc.]). The second issue is linked with both the Golem effect and the Pygmalion effect.

It is a cliché to claim that effective language learning is highly enhanced in a positive, friendly environment – one in which learners feel secure and can expect help and encouragement in their attempts to use their potential; in other words, language learning (and verbal communication) is to take place where anxiety is to be absent. Yet, since anxiety usually does linger in learners’ minds it appears useful to find out its background causes and possible reasons. With this in mind I have conducted some research among university students.

The subjects were 127 Polish and Ukrainian students of the University of Social Sciences in the Department of English Studies at Warsaw, males and females, 20–23 years of age. They agreed voluntarily to respond individually to a number of questions in a questionnaire while being gathered together in a large room during 50 minutes. These students, English majors, receive highly intensive training in all language skills, provided by experienced Polish and American teachers: apart from this they are exposed to a great deal of input since all lectures and classes they participate in are conducted in the English language. It is needless to argue that they are well motivated since they are all fee-paying students, eager to receive their degrees.

The research instrument used to investigate the students was a fairly concise questionnaire (cf. Appendix); it contained closed, multiple choice, and open questions that were designed to find correlations between the participants’ anxiety, its reasons, and its effects on language learning and communication in English. The questions refer to potential causes that might have been responsible for anxiety; they were divided into three groups labelled respectively: traumatic events, evaluative rating, and fighting anxiety. It is presumed that trauma experienced in childhood or youth may leave psychologically harmful traces that can eventually become possible causes of trait anxiety; evaluative rating is considered to be linked with the Golem effect and the Pygmalion effect. The open questions in the third group seek answers that

indicate the most common and frequent ways students try to cope with anxiety while they are experiencing it – it is the inadequate handling of their sorrowful feelings that causes anxiety. The questionnaire (cf. Appendix) was designed to verify the main assumptions postulated in the paper and sought answers to the following queries:

- 1) Does a traumatic experience affect the learner's psychological comfort?
- 2) Does a subjective evaluation of the student's performance affect his achievement?
- 3) What measures are helpful in dealing with anxiety?

An accurate count of the answers displays the following results:

Traumatic experience:

Question 1. Have you ever suffered from separation or lack of contact with someone close (parent/s, sibling, beloved relative)?

29 students (22.8%) provided 'yes' answers

Question 2. Have you ever suffered from the death of someone close?

8 students (6.3%)

Altogether 37 students (29.1%) admitted they had suffered from some painful shock

Evaluative rating:

Question 1. How do **you** assess your achievements in learning English: poor, average, good excellent?

a. poor – 21 students

b. average – 54 (11 traumatics included themselves in this group)

c. good – 45 (5 traumatics assessed themselves as good)

d. excellent – 7

The figures in a, b, and c indicate that trauma does not necessarily cause low self-esteem.

2. How do your **teachers** rate your achievements in language skills (indicate the appropriate):

a. listening comprehension poor – 53, average – 43, good – 21, excellent – 10

b. reading comprehension poor – 31, average – 49, good – 34, excellent – 13

c. speaking poor – 45, average – 55, good – 18, excellent – 11

d. writing poor – 69, average – 39, good – 19, excellent – 0

3. Which language skill do you find difficult / easy (indicate):

a. listening comprehension difficult – 48 / easy – 79

b. reading comprehension difficult – 22 / easy – 105

c. speaking difficult – 48 / easy – 79

d. writing difficult – 118 / easy – 9

4. Which language skill do you believe you are the best / the worst at:

a. listening comprehension best – 125 / worst – 2

b. reading comprehension best – 127 / worst – 0

c. speaking best – 107 / worst – 20

d. writing best – 36 / worst – 91

Fighting anxiety

1. What do you do to overcome anxiety when you speak English? (describe briefly)

a. in the classroom

typical answers: *I try to breathe quietly; I rely on teacher's/classmates' support; I guess the answer*

b. out of class

I try to concentrate on comprehension; I rehearse my participation

2. Do you expect help to fight anxiety? (indicate one or both answers)

a. from the teacher yes (33) / no (41)

b. from classmates yes (45) / no (37)

3. Does your teacher actually help you and if she does, how?

Tells me to ignore possible mistakes

4. What might help you overcome anxiety when you speak English?

I must develop a conviction that my English is sufficient for communication

Note. Not all students supplied answers to "Fighting anxiety"

COMMENTS

A meticulous analysis of the answers to the open questions demonstrates that, as suggested above, anxiety may be a remnant of an earlier trauma; yet, out of 37 students who admitted having been distressed 16 did not seem to be affected by the experience (i.e. did not find themselves anxious) – they rated themselves higher than could be expected (did not consider themselves poor students). This seems to confirm the impact of the *Pygmalion effect* on achievement.

In relation to evaluative rating it appears that students assess themselves higher than their teachers do. They think teachers undervalue their competences and are often unjust; this is frustrating to students and affects their self-esteem, in consequence bringing about anxiety. Students perceive teachers as demanding more than they should – this is in stark contrast to their own self-evaluation.

Note. The learner's own low assessment is taken as indicative of low self-esteem echoing an inferiority complex. The teacher's low assessment strengthens this.

CONCLUSIONS

Language anxiety is characteristically and most often experienced by learners who lack confidence in their abilities, i.e. have low self-esteem, are shy, and are withdrawn in interpersonal relations. It typically relates to oral communication in a foreign language, particularly in classroom interaction which can invoke a variety of sources of anxiety, the most frequent of which being fear of making errors and of intercommunication failure. This is often intensified by unduly and obsessive comparison to classmates and/or by poor rapport with the teacher. Apart from the (somatic, physical) symptoms mentioned earlier, anxiety manifests itself in avoidance behaviour – learners’ exhibit unwillingness to participate in communicative tasks and activities. They also avoid eye contact and try to hide behind classmates. These learners need constant encouragement from the teacher who should patiently convince them that learning a language and particularly speaking in it is not an unreachable goal – *the devil’s not that black as he is painted*. The teacher will succeed if he treats anxious learners gently and tactfully and makes the whole class understand that they can largely contribute to the learning atmosphere.

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APPENDIX

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Traumatic events – possible causes of anxiety

1. Have you ever suffered from separation or lack of contact with someone close (parent/s, sibling, beloved relative)? (indicate)
Yes – No
2. Have you ever suffered from the death of someone close?
Yes – No

Evaluative rating

1. How do **you** assess your achievements in learning English (tick the appropriate):
 - a. mediocre
 - b. poor
 - c. average
 - d. good
 - e. excellent
2. How do your **teachers** rate your achievements in language skills (indicate the appropriate):
 - a. listening comprehension mediocre, poor, average, good excellent
 - b. reading comprehension mediocre, poor, average, good excellent
 - c. speaking mediocre, poor, average, good excellent
 - d. writing mediocre, poor, average, good excellent
3. Which language skill is the most difficult / the easiest for you (indicate):
 - a. listening comprehension
 - b. reading comprehension
 - c. speaking
 - d. writing
4. Which language skill do you believe you are the best / the worst at:
 - a. listening comprehension
 - b. reading comprehension
 - c. speaking
 - d. writing

Fighting anxiety

1. What do you do to overcome anxiety when you speak English it? (describe briefly)
 - a. in the classroom

 - b. out of class

2. Do you expect help to fight anxiety? (indicate one or both answers)
 - a. from the teacher
 - b. from classmates
3. Does your teacher actually help you and if so how?

4. What might help you overcome anxiety when you speak English?
