

FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY IN THE CLASSROOM

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There are many instances in which people may experience unsettling feelings when they have to verbally communicate with others and these can arise in various forms and for various reasons. For example, some may fear public speaking, others may shy away from speaking to new people, and for some, interacting with anybody at all can prove incredibly difficult. Speaking, for a number of reasons, can be a point of great difficulty for many human beings. Another common example that we may think of when searching for examples of these nervous verbal exchanges is speaking in a foreign language. Many of us have memories of ridicule and failure in language classes at school, or of failing to communicate effectively while travelling in a foreign country, and this may or may not fill us with some level of shame. For those of us who experience embarrassment when attempting to speak a foreign language, the foreign language classroom can be a place of great fear.

All foreign language lessons may involve some element of speaking, however, in the speaking class, one's primary objective is to communicate within that language and there may be little to no use of the speaker's first language. This presents a very daunting situation for those for whom speaking and speaking in a foreign language is troublesome in any way. Not only must they use that language, but they must use it in front of a varying number of observers in the form of other students or teachers, and, even if accuracy is not the main goal, the possibility that they may say something incorrectly, in front of others, is ever present. This setting is a source of or an enhancer of anxiety for many.

The British Psychological Society defines the sensation of **anxiety** as a sensation that "...usually manifests itself as a feeling of profound agitation and unease about an imminent unpleasant experience..." that can occur with such physical symptoms as an increased heart rate, hyperventilation, dizziness, nausea, hot flushes, increased perspiration, shaking and palpitations [5]. It is this feeling and these

physical sensations that some feel in varying instances of verbal communication with others, and that others feel when communicating in a foreign language in particular. This latter form has been termed **Foreign Language Anxiety** (FLA), and has been studied fairly regularly since it was more comprehensively surmised in 1986 by *Horwitz and Cope*. In their study, they identified FLA as: “...essentially the same as...any specific anxiety. They (students) experience apprehension, worry, even dread. They have difficulty concentrating, become forgetful, sweat, and have palpitations. They exhibit avoidance behaviour such as missing class and postponing homework” [1, p.127]. They furthered the analysis of the condition, however, by asserting that where the phenomenon had once been thought of as some combination of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, it is actually “...a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviour related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process [1, p.128].

That is, it is a complex phenomenon of its own. The scientists bring together elements from previous studies concerning the topic, such as the various habits of more anxious language-learners, and note some common traits of the phenomenon, such as making errors that are normally within a student’s capability, which in turn, increases nervousness; and an unwillingness to speak until students are certain the language produced would be perfect. Moreover, the studies by *Savignon and Krashen* show the importance of “spontaneous conversational interactions” to the development of the foreign language; something done with great difficulty by the anxious foreign language learner and meaning, of course, that the development of language is severely impeded. It has been found that “...linguistic difficulties...,cognitive challenges (fear of failure in front of others, fear of exams, fear of failure in communication, lack of self-esteem, fear of making mistakes)...(and) the role of the teachers...” amongst other things, were identified as sources of speaking anxiety [3; 4, p.465].

When students enter the classroom, there are already a number of disadvantages present impeding their development in the English language and the

possibilities for anxiety around the prospect of speaking. It is necessary to determine the way in which anxiety as a result of speaking one's foreign language of English occurs, appears, affects the production of language and affects other students and the lesson at large.

The most common way a student experiences anxiety is through *unease, feelings affecting their self-esteem and bodily sensations associated with anxiety*. Some students state that they adopt some *physical behaviour* at the time of anxiety, such as fiddling with objects. Teachers note that they observe anxious students through signs of *visible discomfort, difficulty speaking, the avoidance of speaking, the avoidance of eye-contact, tone of voice, and a small number remarked on explicit symptoms of anxiety, such as trembling, blushing and holding objects*. Both teachers and students may notice a *severe disruption to language produced*, with both groups noting that language is prevented or halted and included increased errors when nervous students attempt to speak [2, p.22].

Teachers also comment on changes in tone disrupting communication. Again, both teachers and students state that anxiety to speak English in students causes notable issues with participation in speaking classes, group and pair-work are also affected. Students note that even though they struggle with anxiety when speaking English, they are still able to gain a valuable educational experience from the speaking class. Most students note that worsening factors to their anxiety when speaking English are both the atmosphere of the class and the reactions of classmates. Teachers remark that other students and the classroom atmosphere may be negatively affected by anxious students.

Therefore foreign language speaking anxiety may be a negative factor both for every student and the class in the whole. We will conclude by stating that research into interventions to manage the problem of student foreign language speaking anxiety in the speaking class and then practising these interventions in the classroom environment is crucial to the overall development of English speaking skills.

Literature:

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