



Language Anxiety in the Minds of English Learners

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Abstract

Language anxiety is a significant psychological factor that influences the process of learning and acquiring English as a second or foreign language. Many English learners experience fear, nervousness, lack of confidence, and hesitation when communicating in English, particularly in speaking, writing, and classroom interactions. These emotional barriers can negatively affect learners' motivation, participation, academic performance, and overall language development. This paper explores the causes and effects of language anxiety among English learners, focusing on psychological, social, and educational factors that contribute to its development. It examines how fear of making mistakes, negative evaluation, limited vocabulary, peer pressure, and classroom environment influence learners' confidence and communication skills. The paper also highlights the role of teachers in creating a supportive, inclusive, and learner-friendly environment that encourages active participation and reduces anxiety. Furthermore, it discusses effective strategies such as collaborative learning, communicative activities, positive reinforcement, and the integration of technology to promote confidence and reduce language-related stress. Understanding language anxiety is essential for developing effective teaching practices and fostering a positive learning experience. The study emphasizes the importance of addressing learners' emotional needs alongside language proficiency to support successful English language learning.

Keywords: Language Anxiety, English Learners, Foreign Language Learning, Communication Skills, Learner Confidence, Language Education.

Introduction

I always feel nervous when speaking English.

I can't make mistakes in front of my friends.

Such statements are commonly uttered by English language learners and are too familiar to the English teachers. These statements indicate an important problem that the majority of learners face in learning and particularly speaking English. Many learners express their inability and sometimes even acknowledge their failure in learning to speak English. These learners may be good at learning other skills but, when it comes to learning to speak English, they claim to have a 'mental block' against it. What is it that causes this block in the minds of the learners? In many cases, students' feeling of stress, anxiety or nervousness may impede their language learning and performance abilities. Both teachers and students are aware and generally feel strongly that anxiety is a major hurdle to be overcome when learning to speak English language. Anxiety and speech communication appear to have a strong bond with each other. Speaking, either in mother tongue or English language in different situations, particularly the situations that demand public speech, tend to be anxiety provoking. However, the anxiety experienced when speaking in English seems to be more debilitating than the anxiety experienced when speaking in the mother tongue. Anxiety while

communicating in English goes a step further with the addition of the difficulties associated with learning and speaking English. In English, a speaker has to look for suitable lexis, has to construct an appropriate syntactic structure and needs to use a comprehensible accent, plus the demanding tasks of thinking and organizing ideas and expressing them at the same time. It is highly important for an English teacher to consider the anxiety in the minds of the learners and help them shed it.

Language Anxiety

Anxiety is a psychological construct, commonly described by psychologists as a vague fear. It is aroused by a specific type of situation or event such as public speaking, examinations, or class participation. Anxiety has been found to interfere with many types of learning but when it is associated with learning English, it becomes an intense and combined feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry. It has been found that the feelings of tension or nervousness centre on the two basic task requirements of English: listening and speaking because, in interaction, both the skills go together. What causes this language anxiety is a central question of interest to all English teachers and learners. Considering anxiety as a highly influential construct in language learning, many researchers have tried to investigate the sources or reasons from which language anxiety can stem, and have suggested a variety of strategies to cope with it. As language anxiety is a psychological construct, it most likely stems from the learner's own self perceptions, perceptions about others (peers, teachers, interlocutors, etc.) and target language communication situations, his/her beliefs about English learning etc. Language anxiety may be a result as well as a cause of insufficient command of English. That is to say it may be experienced due to linguistic difficulties the learners face in learning and using English. Within social contexts, Social status of the speaker and the interlocutor, a sense of power relations between them, and gender could also be important factors in causing language anxiety for English speakers. A thorough and proper understanding of the learner's language anxiety could potentially assist the language teachers to alleviate anxiety in the classroom setting and to make the classroom environment less anxiety-provoking and hence to improve learners' performance in English. We live in an educational world where Speaking is seen as a necessary, positive personal skill. Worldwide expansion of English Language has increased this demand to acquire good communication skills in English. However, learners of English language often express a feeling of stress, nervousness or anxiety while learning to speak English language and claim to have, as mentioned above, a 'mental block' against learning English. The problem exists among the learners from beginning levels to more advanced levels. Even highly advanced learners feel anxious while learning and particularly speaking English in some situations, both within and outside the classroom settings. These learners wonder why they cannot speak English well, because their compulsive efforts do not lead to their intended performance.

Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning

Research on language anxiety suggests that certain beliefs about English learning also contribute to the student's tension and frustration in the class. The researchers use terms such as 'erroneous' or 'irrational' to indicate certain widely held beliefs about language learning which can be a source of anxiety. Such beliefs have been found to cast a considerable influence upon the ultimate achievement and performance of the learners in English.

Some of the false beliefs of the learners are listed below:

1. Some students believe that accuracy must be sought before saying anything in English.
2. Some attach great importance to speaking with excellent native like accent.
3. Others believe that it is wrong to guess the meaning of an unfamiliar English word.
4. Some hold that English learning is basically an act of translating from mother tongue
5. Some view that fluency in English can be achieved within a stipulated time.
6. Some believe that language learning is a special gift not possessed by all.
7. Some learners believe that pronunciation is the most important aspect of language learning.

These unrealistic perceptions or beliefs about English learning can lead to frustration or anger towards students' own performance in English. Erroneous beliefs about English learning can contribute greatly to creating language anxiety in students. Unrealistic beliefs can lead to greater anxiety and frustration, especially when the beliefs and reality clash. For example, if the learners start learning English with the belief that pronunciation is the single most important aspect of language learning, they will naturally feel frustrated to find the reality of their poor speech pronunciation even after learning and practicing for a long time. These beliefs are most likely to originate from learners' perfectionist nature. The perfectionist learners like to speak flawlessly, with no grammar or pronunciation errors. These high or ideal standards create an ideal situation for the development of language anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation is an extension of the language anxiety. It may occur in any social, evaluative situation, such as interviewing for a job or speaking

in English language class. It pertains not only to the teacher's evaluation of the students but also to the perceived reaction of other students as well.

Instructors' Beliefs about Language Teaching

Just like learners' beliefs about language learning, some instructor's beliefs about language learning and teaching have also been found to be a source of anxiety. The instructors' belief that their role is to correct rather than to facilitate students when they make mistakes exacerbates language anxiety in students. The majority of instructors consider their role to be an unquestionable leader rather than a counselor and friend and they also object to a too friendly and in authoritative student-teacher relationship. The students realize that some error corrections are necessary but they consistently report anxiety over responding incorrectly amidst other students. The problem for the students is not necessarily error correction but the manner of error correction – when, how often, and most importantly, how errors are corrected. In addition to error correction, some instructors have been reported not to promote pair or group work in fear that the class may get out of control, and think that a teacher should be doing most of the talking and teaching, and that their role is more like a drill master's than a facilitator's. These beliefs have been found to contribute to learner's language anxiety. Recognition or awareness of these beliefs by both the learners, as well as the teachers, is essential for effective alleviation of language anxiety in learners.

Fear of Making Mistakes and Apprehension about Others' Evaluation

Different activities in the classroom procedure, particularly ones that demand students to speak in front of the whole class, have been found to be the most anxiety provoking. It is mostly in the classroom environment that feed back on errors is provided frequently. This leads many learners to frustration and embarrassment by making them conscious about their deficiencies. Students feel more at ease when the instructors' manner of error correction is not harsh and when they are friendly, patient, and have a good sense of humour

Recommendations

1. First and foremost, English teachers should acknowledge the existence of the feeling of anxiety in learning and particularly speaking English language and then should take initiatives for its effective reduction. They should identify individuals with signs of stress and anxiety and should apply appropriate strategies to help them counteract these feelings.
2. A truly communicative approach should be adopted to provide students with more chances to practice their speaking skills.
3. For active participation in the classroom discussion, it should be ensured that students are provided with friendly, informal and learning-supportive environments. This can be done by teachers' friendly, helpful and cooperative behaviour, making students feel comfortable when speaking in the class. This can also reduce, although not eliminate altogether, the effect of social and status difference between students and teachers to a considerable extent.
4. As students appear to be acutely sensitive to fear of making mistakes, teachers should encourage students to have the confidence to make mistakes in order to acquire communication skills.
5. The teachers should initiate discussion in the class about the feelings of anxiety and should take measures to reduce the sense of competition among them.
6. To encouraging students to feel successful in using English, teachers should avoid setting up activities that enhance the chances for them to fail. They should also make sure whether the students are ready for the given activity and have sufficient ideas and lexis to complete the task successfully.
7. It is also recommended that teachers should confront students' erroneous and irrational beliefs by cultivating in them a healthy idea about language learning.
8. Familiarity with the culture and ethnic background of the students and an awareness of their previous language learning experiences can also assist language teachers to understand and decode anxiety-related behaviors in some students. In a class of mixed cultures, teachers should specifically make the effort to create a sense of friendship and cooperation among the students. This will help them to speak more confidently and with less anxiety in the class.
9. Finally, there should be some specific teachers training courses on language anxiety in order to make teachers aware of this complex issue and, hence, alleviate it.

Conclusion

The role of language teachers is deemed highly crucial and their particular beliefs, perceptions and attitudes towards language learning and teaching process have the potential of both causing and reducing language anxiety in the learners.

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