Language Anxiety in Foreign Language Learning--A Study of Vocational College Students’ LA in Oral English Class

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Abstract. Among a wide spectrum of affect-related factors, language anxiety is a very important factor influencing foreign language learning. In oral English class, many language learners experience language anxiety, which will in turn hamper their potential for foreign language learning. The author of the present paper examines language anxiety, exploring whether language teachers can be the source of some students’ language anxiety or otherwise the alleviant of their language anxiety. Strategies for alleviating students’ language anxiety are offered.

Introduction

In the field of FLT (foreign language teaching) along with the development of psycholinguistics, the emotional aspect of learners is receiving increasing concern in addition to the cognitive aspect. Of a multiplicity of affective elements that influence FL learning, language anxiety is the one that cannot be overlooked. Researchers have studied the effects of anxiety on FL learning since the 1970’s, and negative correlations between language anxiety and FL learning have already been discovered[1]. Language anxiety (LA) is an awful feeling for language learners and it in turn hampers their potential for FL learning.

“Students’ low self-esteem, low degree of ambiguity-tolerance, competitiveness and their personality are all interrelated with the occurrence of foreign language anxiety”[2]. Instead of analyzing language anxiety from these facets, the author of this paper looks into the problem from a new angle. In oral English class, students are frequently called on to answer a question or participate in various speaking activities, which put them into a tense state. However, they seem to feel comforted by the teacher’s smile, but generate an even nervous feeling when the teacher frowns. This paper aims to explore whether FL teachers play a vital role in the occurrence or otherwise alleviation of LA for vocational college students.

Literature Review

Language anxiety is a mental state defined as “the fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language” [3]. Regardless of whether the setting is formal or informal, LA ranks high among factors influencing FL learning. Consequently, in the process of FL learning which requires much communication, students experiencing LA may avoid interaction and fail to actively participate in classroom activities.

Affective factors have a strong influence on FL learning. A helpful way of understanding its influence is to look at affective filter hypothesis. The notion of affective filter is used by Dulay and Burt, and finds its place in Krashen’s Input Theory. Keith Johnson has offered an explanation of this hypothesis. Affect serves as a ‘filter’ through which FL input has to pass before it is acquired. With a positive feeling, the learner is more open to input and the language passes through the filter. On the other hand, if the learner has negative feelings, the filter will be clogged and little gets through[4]. When students are afflicted by LA, their filter for receiving language input will be blocked. At this moment, even the most learned teachers using the most advanced teaching facilities will find themselves helpless when they want to convey knowledge of the target language to the learners. LA, a kind of negative emotion on most occasions, will consequently be a hindrance to FL learning.
A large number of researches indicate a negative correlation of LA with grades in language courses, proficiency test performance, performance in speaking and writing tasks, self-confidence in language learning as well as self-esteem[2]. It is generally agreed that LA will greatly impede FL learning. A broad understanding of the impact of LA is very crucial to FLT. Attention to the existence of LA can promote language teaching and learning efficiency, which will in turn alleviate students’ LA.

“Language learning is a cognitive activity that relies on encoding, storage, and retrieval processes, and anxiety can interfere with each of these for anxious students” [5]. If anxiety impairs cognitive function, students who are anxious may learn less and also may not be able to demonstrate what they have learned. Brantmeier discovered that students were more anxious about speaking than writing, and equally anxious about listening and reading[6]. For many students learning a foreign language in a totally different culture where the language is not commonly used in their communities, speaking the foreign language in public is a painful experience, for their errors are put on display. Under this circumstance, LA occurs, resulting in communication avoidance.

Method

Instrument

This study employs a survey to examine whether the negative impact of FL teachers is interrelated with learners’ LA. The survey, conducted during 2016-2017 academic year, was based on classroom observations in Class A and Class B at separate time but on the same day. The participants are all freshmen from Suzhou Industrial Park Institute of Services Outsourcing, majoring in software technology. The number of the students who were all in the first year of college was 46 and 41 respectively. The two classes were identical in age, textbook, day for studying the lesson as well as the gender of their teachers. Without the interference of these variables, anxiety-causing factors were explored.

Observations of Classroom Teaching

In oral English class, special attention was paid to the two teachers’ performance, which is now listed in the following table for comparison. The two teachers are both female.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment of errors</th>
<th>Teacher A</th>
<th>Teacher B</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constantly compared students to their peers. Student errors were not tactically corrected.</td>
<td>&quot;Excuse me?&quot; or &quot;Pardon?&quot; were employed to hint that the student's utterance contained some mistakes. Sometimes errors were gently pointed out.</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural information</th>
<th>Teacher A</th>
<th>Teacher B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevant cultural information was not offered when students might easily feel at a loss.</td>
<td>Apart from the teaching of grammatical points, cultural information was also touched upon.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>Way of asking questions</th>
<th>Teacher A</th>
<th>Teacher B</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When it came to a simple question, her tone caused students to have a sense of inferiority.</td>
<td>Smile that indicted her sincerity. Such encouragement as “Just have a try” was frequently employed.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<th>Teacher response</th>
<th>Teacher A</th>
<th>Teacher B</th>
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<tr>
<td>No positive response. Merely &quot;Right&quot; was said when the answer offered was appropriate. Sometimes students did get praise for satisfactory answers.</td>
<td>When answers offered were correct, Such verbal praise as “very good”, “excellent” was constantly given to students. Appreciation was displayed by a kind and pleasant countenance.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Classroom activities

There was little teacher guidance and encouragement from the teacher.

Silent time was provided to students and group discussions were organized when they were to fulfill demanding tasks. The teacher went around to offer help.

Data Collection and Findings

Immediately after classroom observations, 87 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the students of the two classes. Through the data collected, the reactions of the students can be shown, which provide information of great importance for data analyses.

FL teachers can be a positive source of learning. However, if they fail to fulfill students’ needs or adopt an inappropriate teaching method, they may be a source of LA. The data collected are analyzed in the following paragraphs. For the convenience of data-analysis, the responses to “strongly agree” and “agree” were combined to create an overall percentage of agreement with the question, and the responses to “disagree” and “strongly disagree” were similarly mixed to gain a measure of disagreement.

The survey indicates the differences regarding cultural awareness between the two groups of respondents. Only 28% of the respondents in Class B feel puzzled when confronted with the sharp contrast between the oriental culture and the occidental culture. But by contrast, 72% of the respondents in Class A feel perplexed by it. Evidently such a finding calls into question Teacher A’s cultural awareness in teaching. As is shown in the above-mentioned comparison between the two teachers, relevant cultural information is not touched upon when students may feel at a loss in Class A. Brown (1980) has suggested that one language learning context is referred to as FL learning, or learning a non-native language in one’s own culture with few immediate and widespread opportunities to use the language within the environment of one’s culture[7]. In oral English class, simultaneously faced with an unknown language and an unknown culture, language learners will most likely generate LA. Teachers should be sensitive enough to meet their needs by introducing abundant cultural information to them.

Teachers’ nonverbal and paralinguistic behavior greatly contributes to the emotional climate of an oral English class. According to the statistics, 78% and 76% of the subjects in Class A and Class B believe the significance of teachers’ encouraging non-verbal behavior. 72% of the respondents in Class A claim that they will feel very relieved if their English teacher is easy-going, and the respective percentage reaches 70% in Class B. This reflects that teachers are responsible for the affective state of students in class. Their verbal expressions, or even their non-verbal behavior and personality will exert an influence on their emotion. Vocational college students are very sensitive to teachers’ nonverbal behavior and respond to different behavior in disparate ways. Easy-going teachers tend to establish harmonious relationship with students who regard them as friends rather than unapproachable authorities. Such teachers often have such encouraging non-verbal behavior as a smile and an assuring glance. It will give students comfort and their affective filters are open to input.

It is very important for FL teachers to create a relaxing classroom atmosphere, which contributes to the easiness of students. 64% of the respondents in Class A feel that the emotional climate of that day’s English class makes them feel uncomfortable, while by contrast 72% of the subjects in another class hold a different view. According to the statistics, 76% of the respondents in Class A and 72% of the respondents in Class B hold that when their teacher is able to create a relaxing emotional climate they will feel less nervous in class. Littlewood claims that unless language learners have a firm confidence in themselves, they may come to feel that they project a silly, boring image when they are required to make a casual conversation or to express spontaneous reactions[8]. They feel that their language mistakes will be the target of their teachers’ ridicule. If the classroom atmosphere is congenial and teachers are friendly, their anxious and constrained state of mind in the FL environment will vanish gradually.

Teachers should be tactful in the treatment of student errors. The survey shows that 74% of the
subjects in Class B are against the opinion that they will feel embarrassed if they offer a wrong answer. However, it is a different case in Class A. This statement is held in trust by 62% of the respondents, with 14% of the subjects holding no opinion. Such a contrast between the reactions of students from two classes, in a sense, stems from the teachers’ handling of the mistakes of students. Though Teacher A does not mean to hurt them but only does it unwittingly, her way of treating student errors will frustrate students’ desire to volunteer and suffocate their burning passion for FL learning. Though error correction will not have very negative effect on some students, for some other students’ correction will produce embarrassment, anger and feelings of inferiority and possibly toward the language itself.

The present study indicates that FL teachers can be anxiety-provoking factors when neglecting the emotional needs of their learners. Clearly shown in the survey are the different responses of the students of the two oral English classes with FL teachers of almost contrasting performance in class. With the findings mentioned above, we are sure to discover that students’ anxiety level in Class A is higher, while that of Class B is lower. Although other variables should not be overlooked, the obvious differences between the two classes lie in, to a large extent, their FL teachers.

Some Strategies for Alleviating LA

Increased Awareness of Paralinguistic and Nonverbal Behavior

The impact of the seemingly trivial paralinguistic and nonverbal behavior is powerful. So in the process of teaching, vocational college teachers should make good use of it. Kelly argues that in class the teachers should maintain comfortable eye contact, orient their bodies to the students, nod, smile, pause and be silent so that the other can speak[9]. They should smile when they enter the classroom, when they pose a question and when students provide satisfactory answers or perform demanding tasks. When students find it hard to present their own selves adequately, the teacher should give them a trusting glance, an assuring nod as well as a smile. Teachers should look in the direction of the student who is answering a certain question and listen with great interest and constant eye contact. A conversational tone of exchange should prevail in class instead of a commanding one, and teachers’ voice should be mild instead of harsh, their tone varied instead of monotonous.

Tactical Error Correction

FL teachers’ immediate response to student answers is necessary to inform them whether their understanding of a specific language point is right or wrong. To make error correction effective and to avoid harmful side effects, teachers should try to avoid overt unfairness and comparison.

(1) Conformation checks

“Conformation check can carry a double function either to confirm understanding of the nonnative or to provide a correction in a non-threatening manner, or both” [10]. In the example below, the vocational college teacher tactically corrects the student’s utterance using grammatically correct forms.

Student: I did morning exercises every day to keep fit.
Teacher: You do morning exercises every day? That is a very good idea to keep fit. (The word “do” should be stressed.)

(2) A gentle indication of error

This way of error treatment is more explicit. Teachers should point out mistakes politely, but display their affirmation with a kind and pleasant countenance at the same time.

T: How do you manage to keep fit?
S: I did morning exercises every day to keep fit.
T: That sounds a very good idea. But Lucy, you’d better bear in mind that present tense should be used when there is such an indicator as “every day” in the sentence.
Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is gaining broad acceptance in a multitude of language learning classrooms. Like other group work, cooperative learning creates a more positive affective climate in the classroom[11]. “Pair share, developed by Kagan, is the most basic cooperative activity in which a question is posed or an issue is presented, and learners are given some time to reflect, take notes before turning to another learner and sharing what they have just thought” [2]. This offers students good opportunities to develop their ideas, rehearse their language and receive feedback on both language and content[2]. Teachers can divide vocational college students into several groups. Each group member, responsible for the contribution of the final answer, takes turns to provide an answer. They shoulder the responsibility together and inspire each other. Their anxiety level will be greatly lowered.

Providing Specific Cultural Information

H. H. Stern claims that for students learning a foreign language in a place far away from the nation where the target language is spoken, cultural teaching should provide background and context which brings the speech community to life, and helps the student to visualize and vicariously experience that reality[12]. Vocational college teachers can introduce such knowledge as ways of greeting, making a phone call and dealing with an angry customer by embodying them into dialogues or improvised dramas.

When mentioning the topic on sports, teachers can introduce some information regarding baseball, cricket, football and golf and ask students from each group to prepare a presentation on the given topic. Each group member is responsible for the contribution of presentation. Documentaries, film clips, flashes concerning the target culture can also be shown during the class. The more students know about the target culture, the less anxious they will be when its sharp contrast with their own culture can be sensed.

LA continues to be a concern of FL teachers, school authorities and psycholinguists. FL teachers are facing great challenges, for they also have to attach great importance to language learners’ emotional state that really counts in their learning process. The survey based on classroom observations furnishes us with valuable information about LA. However, the limitations of the study can by no means be neglected. In the present study, other anxiety-inducing factors, which may affect the results, are not included. Furthermore, the sample size is not large enough to represent the affective state of vocational college students in China, hence further study in a larger scale should be carried out to explore deeper in this field.

References


