

Affective Factors: Anxiety

Mahshad Tasnimi
Islamic Azad University

Tasnimi, M. (2009). Affective factors: Anxiety. *Journal of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*, 13(2), 117-124.

Affective factors seem to play a crucial role in success or failure in second language acquisition. Negative attitudes can reduce learners' motivation and harm language learning, while positive attitudes can do the reverse. Discovering students' attitudes about language will help both teacher and student in teaching learning process. Anxiety is one of the affective factors which plays an important role in learning and teaching process. This article deals with the concept of anxiety, its measurement and its contribution to learning and teaching.

1 Affective Factors: Anxiety

Success or failure in second language acquisition has been attributed to many factors. Affective factors seem to play a crucial role in this regard. Affect is "a term that refers to the purposive and emotional sides of a person's reaction to what is going on" (Stevick, 1999), as cited in Finch, n.d). Stern (1983) considers attitudes and motivation as two major concepts of affect. Calling affective factors as volatile, Ellis (1994) asserts that they affect not only overall learning process but also responses to particular learning activities on a day-by-day and moment-by-moment basis. Negative attitudes can reduce learners' motivation and harm language learning, while positive attitudes can do the reverse (Oxford, 2001). "Affective factors include motivation, self-efficacy, tolerance of ambiguity, and anxiety among others" (Ehrman, 2003, p. 319). Discovering students' attitudes about language will help both teacher and student in teaching learning process. Early research on attitudes dates back to the early fifties. According to Stern (1983), early researches on attitudes were done by Gardner and Lambert and later by Gardner and his colleagues. These studies focused on learner's social attitudes and learners' motivation in relation to the learning outcome. The findings show that there was a positive association between measured learning outcomes and attitudes toward the target group. Later, research on attitudes became more specialized, focusing on single variables such as motivation or anxiety. In this article, anxiety variable is analyzed in detail.

Mahshad Tasnimi

2 Definition of Anxiety

“Anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system” (Spielberger (1983) as cited in Horwitz, 2001, p. 113). Some symptoms of anxiety are self-belittling, feeling of apprehension, and even bodily responses such as a faster heartbeat (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). To many scholars and researchers anxiety is one of the affective factors which plays an important role in second language acquisition and L2 performance (Brown, 2000; Dornyei, 2005; Ellis, 1994; Horwitz, 2001).

3 Anxiety Taxonomy

Earlier studies on anxiety dates back to the mid 1960s. These studies failed to find evidence of the effect of general anxiety on second language learning. One problem was in not finding a good way of measuring anxiety (Horwitz, 2001; Spolsky, 1989). Horwitz (2001) asserts that Scovel (1978) suggested a rational solution to this problem by arguing that language researchers should be specific about the type of anxiety they are measuring. Generally, two important anxiety distinctions are mentioned:

- *Beneficial/facilitating vs. inhibiting/debilitating anxiety*: as cited in Ellis (1994), Alpert and Haber (1960) differentiate between facilitating and debilitating anxiety. Facilitating anxiety motivates learners to fight the new leaning task and promotes them to make extra effort to overcome their feeling of anxiety. In contrast, debilitating anxiety causes the learners to flee the learning task in order to avoid the source of anxiety. (Ellis, 1994). Oxford, (1999) as cited in Brown (2000) refers to this dichotomy as harmful and helpful anxiety. It seems that a low-anxiety state has a facilitating function in learning process, while a high-anxiety state has a debilitating one (Ellis, 1994).
- *Trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety*: Izard (1972) as cited in Finch, (n.d) makes a distinction between trait anxiety, state anxiety and situation- specific anxiety. Trait anxiety is a stable part of a person’s personality, that is a more permanent disposition to be anxious. State anxiety can be defined as apprehension that is experienced at a particular moment in time. It is transient, moment-to-moment experience of anxiety which is related to specific events or situations (Dornyei, 2005; Ehrman, 1996, Ellis, 1994). Situation-specific anxiety is used to refer to the anxiety which is aroused by a specific type of situation or

Affective Factor: Anxiety

event such as public speaking or class participation (Horwitz, 2001; Ellis, 1994). As cited in Hurwitz (2001), Horwitz and Cope (1986) conceptualized a situation-specific anxiety construct that they called *foreign language anxiety*. They argue that foreign language anxiety is responsible for students' negative emotional reactions to language learning. Foreign language anxiety consists of three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and the fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz, 2001).

4 Components of Anxiety

Anxiety is a complex construct. *Worry* and *emotionality* are considered as separate components of anxiety (Liebert & Morris, (1967), as cited in Finch, n.d). Crozier (1997) asserts that worry seems to be a thought process rather than mental imagery, that is worrying is associated with thought on the things that could go wrong. Calling worry the cognitive component of anxiety, Dornyei (2005) asserts that worry has been shown to have a negative impact on performance.

5 Measuring Anxiety

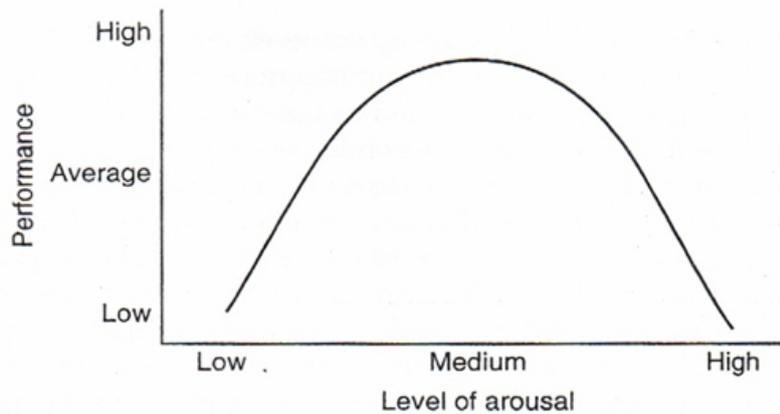
Anxiety can either help or hinder performance, depending on the factors like the level of anxiety or the nature of the task. The relationship between anxiety and performance can be represented on a graph, with anxiety on the horizontal axis and performance on the vertical axis. The resulting shape is usually an inverted U, and the high spot represents the peak performance. There is an optimal level of anxiety for performance, and levels lower or higher than the optimal are associated with deterioration in performance (Crozier, 1997, Ehrman, 1996). “The phenomenon of too much or too little anxiety at either extreme and an optimal level somewhere in the middle is referred to by psychologists as the *Yerkes- Dodson Law*” (see Figure1) (Ehrman, 1996, p. 149).

To assess anxiety, various measures have been developed over time, such as French Class Anxiety Scale (Gardner & Smith, 1975) or the English Use Anxiety Scale (Clement, Gardner, and Smyth, 1977) (as cited in De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2005). In recent years, there has been much more interest in the role of language anxiety. As cited in Horwitz (2001), Horwitz and Cope (1989) developed an instrument, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure foreign language anxiety. The scale consists of thirty-three items, scored on five-points Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scale has been shown to be reliable and its construct validity is supported (Dornyei, 2005; Horwitz, 2001; Spolsky, 1989). Horwitz (2001) asserts that FLCAS is a valid indicator of foreign

Mahshad Tasnimi

language anxiety and a negative relationship between anxiety and achievement has been indicated by the scale.

Figure 1. An inverted U curve showing the relationship between level of arousal of anxiety and performance (Andrade & May, 2004)



Although the mentioned measures of anxiety have been standardized, what is open to question is what precisely these tests are measuring. Referring to this question, Williams and Burden (1997) assert that these tests are measuring a *hypothetical construct*, a term to account for something that doesn't really exist. They warn that:

However, there is a danger that this can lead to a belief that the test is measuring a relatively fixed characteristic, even if not such characteristic actually exists. We would argue instead that individual traits such as intelligence or aptitude or anxiety are more usefully treated as variable, as context specific, and amenable to change. It would follow from this that a test should be expected to produce different results on different occasions. ... If a test has a high rating for validity, it does not necessarily mean that the trait itself actually exists. The point is that it is extremely difficult to construct a test which is truly valid in that it really measures what it is supposed to measure. (p. 90)

6 Overcoming Anxiety

All of us use a variety of behaviors for softening failures, protecting ourselves from overwhelming anxiety, and maintaining our sense of personal worth. Technically, these behaviors are referred to as *defense mechanisms*.

Affective Factor: Anxiety

Introducing defense mechanisms Ehrman (1999) classifies the common defense mechanisms as: a) flight or withdrawal behaviors, such as fantasy (escaping from reality, b) aggressive or fight behavior such as competition with classmates (trying to demonstrate one's superiority, c) group manipulation behavior such as focusing on one (scapegoating), and d) compromise behavior such as humor (e.g. laughter).

7 Implications for Teaching and Learning

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) as cited in Ellis point out that anxiety may affect three stages of the learning process: input, processing and output. They proposed a model according to which the relationship between anxiety and learning is demonstrated. This model is represented in table 1.

Table 1. A Model of the Role of Anxiety in Language Learning (based on Macintyre and Gardner I 989) (Ellis, 1994, p. 483)

Stage	Type of anxiety	Effect on learning
Beginner	Very little—restricted to state anxiety	None
Post-beginner	Situation anxiety develops if learner develops negative expectations based on bad learning experiences	Learner expects to be nervous and performs poorly
Later	Poor performance and continued bad learning experiences result in increased anxiety	Continued poor performance

Scholars and researchers have proposed different methods and ideas to cope with the anxiety that is associated with learning. “The development of the whole-person must be based on the connection of cognition and affect” (Wang, 2005). For example Curran’s whole person learning and Krashen’s affective hypothesis are some cases in point. However, Language teachers would like to know the sources of language anxiety in order to minimize them. In order to reduce the learners’ anxiety, teachers need to give the students every advantage. The following are some practical suggestions:

- Ehrman (2003) suggests that teachers include a program that enables learners to start in a relatively comfortable and stress-free environment, and gives them the opportunity to learn in their preferred styles. In addition, being aware of the defense mechanisms, teachers shouldn’t take students’ behaviors personally (e.g. scapegoating of the program) and they can better address the things that are causing anxiety in the students (Ehrman, 1996).

Mahshad Tasnimi

- Emphasizing stress-free classroom atmosphere, Horwitz (2001) suggests that it may be possible to reduce the language learners' anxiety by offering them sincere support and interest. Drawing on different studies, she reports some sources of anxiety as well as several successful coping strategies. Some sources of anxiety are negative self-assessment, high personal expectations, and certain classroom practices like speaking in front of the class. Successful coping strategies includes studying, getting the unpleasant task over with, deep breathing, and positive self talk on the part of the learner. In terms of teacher behavior, the suggested strategies includes not calling on individual students, not teaching the language as a massive memorization task and being sensitive to students' out-of-class obligations
- Crozier (1997) suggests some techniques for coping with the anxiety that is associated with examination. He asserts instruction that emphasizes the evaluative nature of the test has an adverse effect on performance. Social support prior to a test has a beneficial effect, that is participation in discussion groups and sharing their anxiety experiences with others. Furthermore, good preparation is an aid to good examination. In addition, explaining in detail the form of the examination, teachers can help reduce learners' anxiety. Crozier believes that taking breaks, spending time on other activities and physical exercise also contributes to coping with anxiety.
- In coping with anxiety, Oxford (2001) puts that certain affective strategies can help learners deal with anxiety through actions such as deep breathing, laughter, positive self talk (I know I can do it!) and praising oneself for performance. Furthermore, she recommends using a language learning diary to record feelings about language learning.

To sum up, language anxiety is undoubtedly an important factor in second language acquisition and use. If we agree that our task as teachers is not only to teach but also to assist learning, we can conclude that:

Our main tasks are threefold: first, to identify the causes of language anxiety and loss of self-confidence in the classroom and eliminate or alleviate them; second, to understand the traits of good classroom dynamics; and third, to create a classroom environment in which these traits may flourish. (Turula, 2008) Table 2 represents a comparison of anxious and good learners.

Further research is needed to address unresolved issues in this regard, such as investigating anxiety in specified aspects of language learning (e.g. reading anxiety or writing anxiety) (Horwitz, 2001). Furthermore, according to Ellis (1994) most of the research to date has gone only a limited way and

Affective Factor: Anxiety

has just examined output. Further research is needed to investigate the effects on input and process of learning.

Table 2. A Comparison of Anxious and Good Learners (Turula, 2008)

Anxious Learner	Good Learner (Wenden and Rubin 1987)
1. Is reluctant to take risks (Ely 1986)	1. Is willing to take risks
2. Relies heavily on memory	2. Is tolerant of ambiguities
3. Is reluctant to hypothesize (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994)	3. Possesses good cognitive strategies of guessing and inferring
4. Is disorganized and inefficient in recall of learned items (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994)	4. Shows good strategies of monitoring, categorizing, and synthesizing
5. Feels apprehension and self-doubt; is frustrated (Arnold and Brown 1999)	5. Shows positive attitude; is sociable and outgoing

References

- Andrade, J., & May, J. (2004). *Cognitive psychology*. New York: Garland Science/BIOS Scientific Publishers.
- Brown, D. H. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (4th ed.). New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Crozier, W. R. (1997). *Individual learners*. New York: Rutledge.
- De Bot, K., Lowie, W., & Verspoor, M. (2005). *Second language acquisition*. New York: Routledge.
- Dornyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ehrman, M. E. (1996). *Understanding second language learning difficulties*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication.
- Ehrman, M. E. (2003). A brief overview of individual differences in second language learning. *System*, 31(3), 313-330.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Finch, A. E. (n.d.). Literature review: Affect in language learning. Retrieved October 11, 2008, from <http://www.finchpark.com/afe/affect.htm>
- Horwitz, E. K. (2001). Language anxiety and achievement. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21, 112-126.
- Mitchell, R., & Myles, F. (2004). *Second language learning theories* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Oxford, R. L. (2001). Language learning strategies. In R. Carter and D. Nunan (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages* (pp. 120-125). Cambridge: Cambridge

Mahshad Tasnimi

- University Press.
- Spolsky, B. (1989). *Conditions for second language learning: introduction to a general theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stern, H. H. (1983). *Fundamental concepts of language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Turula, A. (2008). Language anxiety and classroom dynamics: A study of adult learners. Retrieved October 11, 2008, from <http://www.exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol40/no2>
- Wang, G. (2005). Humanistic approach and affective factors in foreign language teaching. *Sino-US English Teaching*, 2, 1-5.
- Williams, M., & Burden, R. (1997). *Psychology for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mahshad Tasnimi
Islamic Azad University
Science and Research Campus
College of Foreign Languages and Literature
31, Shadi (22) Alley, Daneshgah St., Qazvin, Iran.
Tel: 0098-9121822772
Email: mahtasnimi@gmail.com

Received: February 2, 2009

Revised: May 29, 2009

Accepted: June 5, 2009