An Analysis of English Learners' Anxiety and Coping Strategies in China*

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Anxiety is possibly the most pervasive obstruction in English learning and it is considered as one of the critical factors that affect foreign language study. In the past decades, the discussion of anxiety has aroused great concern in the field of foreign language study. This paper presents a thorough analysis of English learners' anxiety and coping strategies in China. Firstly, it provides a brief introduction of anxiety in language study. Secondly, it depicts the relevant studies about anxiety in China. Thirdly, it analyzes the current situation of English learning and learners' anxiety in China. Fourthly, it offers the learning implications to learners and teaching strategies to reduce anxiety. According to the concerning research, this paper concludes the coping strategies for reducing anxiety and the suggestions for further study. It is hoped that this study will provide useful insight to the Chinese learners in foreign language studies.

Keywords: anxiety, English learners, coping strategies, China

Introduction

With the advent of humanistic psychology, more and more researchers and instructors have paid their attention to learners' affective variables. A great deal of previous study has shown that affective variables have great impact on language achievement, and it can increase or decrease retention and success in foreign language learning. While among the numerous affective variables, anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process. A great deal of previous study was done on the relationship between anxiety and language achievement while there is no agreement on their relationship. Although anxiety research has achieved rich results and is very mature in Western countries, studies on foreign language learning anxiety have far fallen behind in China. Since China is a nation with many English learners; therefore, discussions on English classroom anxiety possess both theoretical significance and pragmatic value. The interactional study between anxiety and foreign language learning will bring great benefits to English study in China.

Literature Review

As a crucial affective variable, anxiety has been a hot topic in the field of second language acquisition since the 1970s and a great deal of research has been done on the relationship between anxiety and foreign language achievement. Up to now, a great deal of research has been done in this field, especially in the Western

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countries. However, most research done in the West uses other languages but not English as the second or foreign language. Much research has similar opinions on the relationship between language anxiety and foreign language learning, that is, when the anxiety level exceeds a certain degree, it will have debilitating impact on the learner. The research usually just tried to find out the relationship between language anxiety and language learning proficiency while not the anxiety arousing-factors and the means to cope with it.

Although there is no agreement on the role of anxiety on foreign language learning, most researchers agree that anxiety has a negative effect on learners' language achievement. The previous research was mainly concerned about the relationship between anxiety and learners' foreign language achievement, and they were mainly carried out in Western countries. There is little research carried out in mainland China, meanwhile, in the West, researchers take other languages but not English as their foreign/second language, which is different from the condition in China. Some studies have been carried on in Taipei, Taiwan, but few studies on the relationship between foreign language anxiety and foreign language achievement have been done in mainland China.

In recent years, there are quite a number of studies concerning the topic in the Chinese context. Most of them are consistent with the results abroad. A researcher chose Junior and Senior High school students as her subjects and found that foreign language anxiety was significantly and negatively correlated with course grades in three language skills (listening, speaking, and reading). Another researcher also found that foreign language anxiety was significantly associated with language oral proficiency. There was also a researcher choosing those foreign students who studied Chinese in China as her subjects and wondered if there would be association between Chinese learning anxiety and Chinese proficiency. Her study showed that only oral proficiency was significantly negatively correlated with Chinese learning anxiety. In addition, there are some other studies which indicate that foreign language anxiety has negative effect on foreign language learning.

Most of the studies reveal that foreign language anxiety or second language anxiety prohibits language acquisition and production and that the effects of language anxiety may be pervasive. Anxiety is an important factor in second language acquisition. It is best seen not as a necessary condition of successful second language learning, but as a factor that contributes to different degrees to different learners. Anxiety in general can be associated with threats to self-efficacy and appraisals of situations as threatening. In a specific situation such as language learning, a fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, communication apprehension, and threats to one's sense of self can reduce feelings of self-efficacy and increase the chances that a second language situation will be seen as threatening. Therefore, it becomes an indispensable quality for language teachers to be able to diagnose language anxiety among students and help them to alleviate anxiety to a low level.

Current Situation of English Learning in China

In China, the importance of English is obviously seen from the fact that English is one of the compulsory courses from most primary schools to colleges and universities. In some college and universities, passing College English Test Band Four (CET-4) is the precondition for them to get their diploma. Despite the fact that the schools, parents, and the society lay great emphasis on English learning, and that students spend 6 years, 10 years, or even a much longer time taking English courses, learning results are far from satisfactory. It is not strange to hear some people complain, after many years of learning, that they cannot handle some of the simplest conversations. This kind of situation owes a lot to the negligence of students' affective variables in the

process of language learning and teaching. As foreign language learners, Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners have something in common with foreign language learners in Western countries, and from several studies in China, we know that anxiety also has great impact on EFL learners' language achievement. Anxiety is a key affective variable which obstructs learners' foreign language achievement in China. In order to get an overall picture of anxiety, and get the relationship between language anxiety and language achievement aiming to promote English learning and teaching in China, it is necessary to carry out a study on foreign language anxiety.

During the last two decades, a great deal of research has been done on anxiety, and has made great progress. However, many questions remain unanswered. Language anxiety is a pervasive and crucial factor which has a great effect on learners' language acquisition; therefore, to have an overall picture of anxiety in foreign language learning becomes very important. In order to further understand how language anxiety relates to EFL learners' language proficiency, to know the relationship between anxiety and learners' educational level, to find out the different anxiety levels between learners coming from cities and rural regions, and learners with different gender, to discover anxiety-provoking sources and find out coping strategies to reduce anxiety, extensive studies covering various samples should be done.

Reasons for English Learners' Anxiety in China

Specially, when communicating in a native language, it is not difficult to understand others or to make oneself understood; adults perceive themselves as competent communicators. However, when communicating in a foreign language, people cannot present themselves fully. Any performance in the foreign language is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or panic. Therefore, there is no exception for Chinese learners. They, having mature thoughts and ideas but immature command of the English language, are not immune to language anxiety.

Moreover, Chinese people are said to be afraid to lose faces. There is no doubt that the fear of losing faces and negative evaluation increases Chinese students' anxiety.

Additionally, the way of Chinese English teaching, which places weight on cognitive tasks rather than communication skills in the classroom, plays a great role in the development of Chinese learners' anxiety in English learning. The skills of reading and writing have been given priority to, with little attention paid to the skill of speaking. Although the teacher-student interactions are frequent in the English class, pedagogical devices such as group discussion, storytelling, role-play that demand verbal output on the part of students are seldom used, let alone out-of-class activities that demand verbal interaction. On the contrary, English teachers do the most of talking, explaining language rules and their exceptions, meanings of words and their usages while students are kept sitting and listening passively. The test-oriented English teaching way deprives students of the opportunities to garner communication skills.

What is more, with China's increasing contact with foreign countries, university graduates are expected to have skilful oral competence if they want to gain the upper hand in the job market. Especially, since China's entry into WTO, there has been a nationwide craze for English. Graduates with competent oral skills are the most popular in the job market. However, in the Chinese unicultural context, lack of opportunities to use English outside the classroom prevents them to some extent from becoming fluent in oral English.

By combining the research of the current learning styles and literature review, six key sources of language anxiety can be identified. Namely, language anxiety may arise from: (1) learners' risk-taking ability; (2)

tolerance of ambiguity; (3) unscientific beliefs about language learning; (4) Instructor-learner interactions; (5) classroom activities and methods; and (6) language testing.

Manifestations of English Learners' Anxiety in China

Although different learners may have different ways to show anxiety in China, yet there are some points in common. The main manifestations of anxiety in China include:

General Avoidance

"Forgetting" the answer, showing carelessness, cutting class, coming late, arriving unprepared, low level of verbal production, lack of volunteering in class, seeming inability to answer even the simplest questions.

Physical Action

Squirming, fidgeting, playing with hair or clothing, nervously touching objects, stuttering or stammering, displaying jittery behaviors, being unable to reproduce the sounds or intonation of the target language even after repeated practice.

Physical Symptoms

Complaining about a headache, experiencing tight muscles, feeling unexplained pain or tension in any part of the body.

Other Signs

Other signs which might reflect language anxiety, depending on the culture: over studying, perfectionism, social avoidance, conversational withdrawal, lack of eye contact, hostility, monosyllabic or noncommittal responses, image protection or masking behaviors (exaggerated smiling, laughing, nodding, joking), failing to interrupt when it would be natural to do so, excessive competitiveness, excessive self-effacement and self-criticism ("I am so stupid").

Learning Implications to Learners

By the thorough analysis of the reasons and manifestations of anxiety, some suggestions can be given to the English learners in China.

Recognize Anxiety and Share it

It is important for the learners to be able to recognize their own feelings. Remind themselves that it is normal to experience language anxiety, and they are not the only one suffering from those feelings. They will find more support from their classmates and teachers when they are more willing to share what they think of anxiety with others.

Set up a Realistic Goal and to Be Less Perfect

The learners need to set reasonable, achievable language learning goals for themselves to alleviate language anxiety. Do not overestimate or underestimate themselves. When they have an unattainable goal, they can easily be frustrated at the failure to meet the goal and they may underestimate their language abilities. Instead, they should give themselves permission to be a less than perfect language learner.

Be Well Prepared for Language Class

One of the most effective ways to reduce anxiety is to be well prepared for language class and go to the language class with confidence. Having confidence in themselves as language learners can be a very powerful

tool in learning well. Remember that it is important to focus on achievement rather than deficiencies in order to make the most of their existing abilities.

Increase Opportunities to Interact in English

Frequent practice will help the learners feel comfortable when they speak in English. Especially if they think their English language competence is limited and they are concerned about it. Never stop improving it.

Coping Strategies to Reduce Anxiety

Discussing Anxieties Openly

English teachers might organize the discussion of anxieties that could help learners to realize their own anxieties as unproductive. As is definitely illustrated during the chatting with several learners, some learners are not aware of their anxieties that cause their speechless in classroom. When asked why they always keep silence, they could not provide a reasonable reason. They could only describe the feeling when a question is asked. They said they always felt uneasy and were afraid of being called on to answer the question. After discussion of the causes for their silence and some analysis of their problems, they admitted that the only cause was anxiety, not other reasons, such as low motivation. They themselves thought it was funny for them to keep their mouths shut only because of fear of derision and mistakes, but not the lack of learning ability. Being aware of this key cause for their silence could encourage them to break the psychological barrier and gain confidence to improve their English proficiency. Some learners knew that anxiety was a problem for them and felt ashamed to tell the truth. They thought university-age learners would be laughed at if they kept silence only because of anxiety. However, when being told that anxiety-caused silence was common in EFL classes, they felt relief and could develop a positive attitude to deal with it. By talking about their own anxiety, the learners could relate highs and lows to specific situations or activities. A chat between learners and the teacher or among learners is an effective communication to narrow the gap and could create a comfortable atmosphere in class or out of class and a good relationship between learners and teacher may be reached by such heart-to-heart discussion.

Giving Proper Classroom Evaluation

According to some studies, classroom evaluations should be given in a careful way. People who are the likeliest candidates for foreign language anxiety fear negative evaluation. Take error as an example, sometimes errors are taken as indicators of one's language development, and sometimes as a factor negatively affecting one's self-confidence. Not all errors are necessarily corrected, especially in the case when learners who are beginning to enjoy benefits from encouragement rather than error correction, but there are also some other learners who urgently need error correction in accuracy exercises. It is therefore the teacher's responsibility to know the learners' preferences and needs, and give the guidance accordingly, but teachers should not necessarily correct every error their learners make.

Proper classroom evaluation helps anxious learners reduce their sense of incompetence. One of the most popular ways of making evaluation in classroom may be to ask learners to evaluate themselves, and their group members, and to assess their contributions to the group. Frequent little success is the best way to begin building a sense of competence. If learners succeed in following what is going on in class and participating in the class activities, then they are going to begin believing that competence is possible. Just let learners know that making mistakes is an inevitable part of learning. And remember, as a teacher, to choose to give proper evaluation.

Helping Learners Raise Their Self-confidence

Self-confidence is one of the most important determinant of language learners' anxiety, self-perception of proficiency, and actual performance. While the relationship between anxiety and self perception of proficiency and the relationship between self perception and actual proficiency are reciprocal. Raising learners' self-perception of proficiency is very necessary. Changing a person's self-perception is not easy; the benefits of improving the self-image of language learners seem worthwhile. It seems reasonable to assume that, given time and a focus on positive experience, we may encourage more self-confident and capable language learners. A language teacher could provide learners with multiple opportunities for classroom success in English (e.g., encourage learners to use simple sentences to express their ideas in English speaking and writing) and teach learners to emphasize their own successful experiences. Thus they would come to perceive themselves as more proficient language learners, increasing their self-confidence. Self-confident learners are not likely to be anxious. Correcting learners' misconception of language learning is also helpful in raising their self-confidence. The teachers should discuss with their learners reasonable commitments for successful language learning and the value of some language ability if it is less fluent. In addition, teachers may want to hold these brief discussions about the process of language learning periodically throughout the language learning experience.

In addition, a language instructor dealing with anxious learners should be aware that apprehensive learners may underestimate their ability. A related strategy would encourage the learners to concentrate on their ability to accomplish the task at hand.

Adopting Cooperative Learning Model

Recently, because the teaching ways are changing from knowledge impartation to knowledge development in China's classrooms, a new teaching model, cooperative learning, is being adopted. Compared with the traditional methods, this new model is a good method to reduce learners' anxieties. Cooperative learning activities can be developed in different forms. Roundtable round robin, number heads together, group investigation, paired classes, cooperative cloze competition, collaborative and cooperative writing, and peer response are examples which are popular with learners.

Teachers can choose a suitable method with regard to learners' needs and possibilities specific to learning contexts. But the group should be heterogeneous since group structure is important in cooperative learning. Whatever activity is chosen, a cooperative group should be formed by the learners of different characters, different sexes, different proficiency and abilities, and even different family backgrounds. Thus in the cooperative group, each individual may play a unique role. Meanwhile, cooperative learning improves the overall climate of the classroom. Thus, it provides supportive evaluation and expands opportunities to receive feedback from group members, which put learners into greater likelihood of success than individual effort can lead to. The help from group members and the duty shared by others reduce learner's debilitating anxiety. Meanwhile, support from group members becomes a powerful motivator, especially to shy, insecure, and uninterested learners. And the successful results of learning through cooperation build in learners' greater confidence and self-esteem on the whole, which will in turn lead to increased learner effort and willingness in language learning.

To make learners cooperate well, cohesiveness must, first of all, be stressed. Strong group cohesiveness makes group cooperation more dynamic and effective. Then the learners had better be taught some specific skills to interact, such as turn-taking, active listening, positive feedback, and so on. Finally, every member in

each group has to express their ideas in foreign language. From above, we see that it is cooperative learning that can encourage the learners to develop positive feeling such as improving self-esteem, self-initiation, self-actualization, and self-evaluation, increasing the chances of learner's participation in language use, building up good relationship between members, relieving the pressure between the teacher and learners, stirring motivation of learning, and so on. All these help to reduce the anxiety of learning foreign language.

Improving Instructor-Learner Interactions

For teachers, the first step to lessen classroom tension is to create a learner-friendly, supportive, and secure classroom atmosphere. It is equally essential for the teacher to help to improve the self-esteem and self-confidence of learners by making it clear to learners that language anxiety episode can be transient and do not inevitably develop into a lasting problem and by providing multiple opportunities for classroom success in English. In English class, the teacher may give learners permission to use English with less perfect performance and give sincere praise that is meaningful to learners. In the interaction between the teacher and learners, learners are most sensitive to the teacher's response to them. They are always aspiring for feedback from the teacher. Proper and effective feedback will become great motive to learners and stimulate their interest in learning. Feedback such as approval and encouragement will help to smooth the interaction between the teacher and learners. Meanwhile, teachers' sense of humor and non-verbal communication such as gestures, postures, and facial expressions can help to transform the formal atmosphere into a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. What is more, teachers are expected to bear classroom goals in mind and help learners develop strategies to meet those goals.

Many studies find that learners are afraid of making mistakes. If teachers can adopt an attitude that mistakes are part of the language learning process and that everyone makes mistakes, learners may feel more at ease. Error correction is not avoidable and sometimes necessary; the key issue for the learners is the manner of error correction. Therefore, teacher's response to student's performance should be neither a simple "right" or "wrong", nor a simple "yes" or "no". At the same time, teachers must carefully decide when, how often, and most importantly, how errors are corrected.

Many empirical studies have proved that learners feel more at ease when the instructor does not overreact to mistakes. The instructor can encourage learners not to be afraid of making mistakes, for example, by saying "that's a good mistake that we can learn from", or "that makes sense, but how about trying it this way?".

Reducing Language Testing Anxiety

To reduce anxiety caused by tests, there are some methods that have to do with learners' psychology and linguistic guidance. Considering learners' psychology, the teacher can guide them into an imaginary activity before tests. Learners can close their eyes and take deep breaths to relax themselves as a physical preparation. Then they are advised to enjoy some pleasant mental scenes. The wonderful imagination will reduce their fear to a certain degree. Positive self-talk such as "I am confident; take it easy" is also quite beneficial. And listening to some light music and taking a walk are other very good alternatives to relax test anxiety. As to linguistic guidance, the teacher can, first of all, make it clear to learners that the emphasis in class is on proficiency rather than the score on the test. And then helping learners to make good preparations for tests is necessary by providing proper skills. Last but not least, not only teachers but also the higher educational institution should follow the reform of quality education and exert less test pressure on learners. According to humanism theory, the education should reject whatever makes people feel bad, and whatever destroys or

forbids esthetic enjoyment. So they should do joint efforts to construct fair and humanistic tests that accurately reflect in-class instruction.

Conclusion

In China, foreign language learning has its uniqueness. Firstly, English learning takes place in classroom settings, which determines few opportunities for the learners to communicate with native speakers. Secondly, English teaching has been identified as teacher-centeredness in China, which is deeply influenced by the tradition of Chinese education. Since foreign language learning environment in China is different from Western countries, it remains to be seen whether the relationship between foreign language anxiety and achievement established in Western countries applies to China. Therefore, there is still large space for carrying out study in this field in China. There is no doubt that it is necessary to conduct further studies on foreign language anxiety.

This study is a general analysis of anxiety and foreign language study in China and it is only a one-scope study. Further studies can be conducted by referring to other factors that may influence foreign language study, such as age, attitude, learning styles, and personality type. If the all-round studies are conducted, there is no doubt that new ideas and learning methods will be proposed for foreign language studies in China.

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