

# Strategies for Coping with Debilitating Language Anxiety

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## Abstract

This paper aims to offer a literature review on debilitating language anxiety as well as highlight some strategies for coping with debilitating language anxiety. Answers to several research questions will be attempted. One area of focus will be to seek how anxiety is defined. This paper will also mention different types of anxiety and how they relate to the language classroom. The question of whether 'language anxiety' exists will also be addressed. A bigger question that is dealt with is the question of whether 'language anxiety' is merely a form of social anxiety and/or related to self-esteem and self-worth. In addition, questions regarding strategies for coping with debilitating language anxiety will be dealt with. Ultimately, with a better understanding of anxiety, perhaps teachers can more effectively aid their students in their attempts at acquiring a second language.

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to offer a literature review on debilitating language anxiety as well as highlight some strategies for coping with debilitating language anxiety. Answers to several research questions will be attempted. These research questions are as follows: What is anxiety? What is language anxiety? Is it any different from just plain (social) anxiety? What is debilitating language

anxiety? What causes (language/social) anxiety? Does (language/social) anxiety limit learners in their attempts at acquiring a second language? If so, how does anxiety limit learners in their attempts at acquiring a second language? What can be done about (language/social) anxiety? Other questions regarding strategies for coping with debilitating language anxiety will also be dealt with. These questions include: Can strategies for coping with (debilitating language) anxiety aid language learners in their attempts at acquiring a second language? What types and/or categories of strategies for coping with (debilitating language) anxiety are there? How can strategies for coping with (debilitating language) anxiety be introduced to learners in the classroom? How can language learners benefit by using strategies for coping with (debilitating language) anxiety? It is hoped that with a better understanding of the answers to as many of these questions as possible, teachers can better help their students in their attempts at acquiring a second language.

### **Anxiety as an Affective Factor**

Attention to affective aspects in language learning is important (Arnold & Brown, 1999). By giving attention to affective aspects teachers can make for more effective language learning. Attention needs to be given to both how we can overcome problems created by negative emotions and to how we can create and use more positive, facilitative emotions or feelings. As language teachers, we need to educate our learners to live more satisfying lives (anxiety-free) and to be responsible (and productive) members of society. To do this, we should be concerned with our learners' cognitive and affective natures and needs.

Among one of the most common negative feelings towards English study that Japanese learners have is anxiety (Tani-Fukuchi, 2005). Takada (2003) found that a major cause of anxiety in Japanese learners of English is the fear of not being able to keep up with their classmates in the classroom. Arnold and Brown

(1999) add that anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process as it is associated with negative feelings such as uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and tension. Uncertainty of other people's behavior can be another form of anxiety.

As people get to know each other, uncertainty tends to decrease (Gundykunst & Kim, 2001). Interest in other people will lead to motivation and a willingness to interact with them. Also, as our cultural and linguistic knowledge of people of other cultures increases, so does our ability to predict their behavior. This also decreases our uncertainty of them.

### **Foreign Language Anxiety or Just Plain Anxiety?**

It is not always clear how foreign language anxiety comes into being (Arnold and Brown, 1999). For some people it may come from being laughed at in class for giving the wrong answer or for factors that have nothing to do with the language class at all. Anxiety in the classroom can make students nervous and afraid which contributes to poor performance which in turn breeds more anxiety. Feelings of fear and nervousness connected to the cognitive side of anxiety is often simply known as worry. But what, then, exactly is anxiety? By definition, Leary and Kowalski (1995) say that anxiety involves apprehensive thoughts or cognition. Anxiety can be accompanied by somatic symptoms such as sweaty palms and increased heart rate. Behaviorally, anxiety is usually accompanied by attempts to avoid or escape the anxiety-producing situation. Some people may feel anxious without showing it, and others may behave in unsociable, withdrawn, or introverted manners, but not feel any anxiety. One way to check if our anxiety is too high is being aware of our "gut reactions" (Gundykunst & Kim, 2001). If our anxiety is too high, it will inhibit interaction with others. However, if we feel no anxiety at all, we may decide we do not care enough to interact with others. Through better awareness of our anxiety levels,

we can manage our anxiety cognitively

## **Social Anxiety**

There are several types of social anxiety. Leary and Kowalski (1995) mention public speaking anxiety, communication apprehension, stage fright, and audience anxiety. There are two conditions that precipitate social anxiety. First, some cases of social anxiety are anticipatory, whereas others are reactive. The second condition involves whether the social anxiety is experienced in a contingent or non contingent encounter.

There are several reasons why people become anxious (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). Feelings of social anxiety are precipitated by many situations including meeting new people, talking to teachers, being in novel situations, speaking or performing in front of groups, and so on. Self-presentation is a significant way of social influence because other people's reactions depend largely on their impressions of us. People are understandably motivated to control how others perceive them. Usually, the impressions people try to create are positive rather than negative because people are more likely to achieve their goals when others hold good impressions of them. When people feel they cannot express the impression they want to, they feel tense, frustrated, and awkward - in other words, they feel socially anxiety. People become socially anxious not only when they are currently being evaluated, but also when the possibility or prospect of interpersonal evaluation exists. Moreover, people may worry more about how others are likely to regard them prior to a social encounter than they do during the interaction itself. Therefore, people may feel social anxiety even when they are alone if they worry about how others may regard them in a future interaction. In addition, people may become anxious about social interactions that are entirely imagined rather than real. We may get more upset about an encounter that we imagine might happen as a real situation. The worst possible

situation from a self-presentational view, Leary and Kowalski add, is when a person's motivation to make a desired impression is high, but events unfold that lead the person to believe the probability of making the impression is zero. Even when people are motivated to make a positive impression, they do not have to think they will make a negative impression to feel some social anxiety. People who want to make a good impression will feel anxious if they think the impression they are making is not adequate to reach their goals in the situation. Therefore, people's social anxiety, according to this view, depends on their own judgments of their self-presentational success relative to their interpersonal goals. However, a person who is not concerned with others' perceptions or apprehensive about making the wrong impression is likely a selfish, egocentric and highly dislikeable individual. People who feel social anxiety are often modest, self-controlled, serious, and tactful.

Social anxiety is not entirely a bad or good thing. It should be noted that the affective side of learning is not in opposition to the cognitive side (Arnold & Brown, 1999). When both are used together, the learning process can be enhanced. These two sides cannot be separated and neither has "the last word".

Moreover, anxiety does not necessarily inhibit performance but in some cases can actually improve it (Dornyei, 2005). This is the difference between beneficial/facilitation anxiety and inhibitory/debilitating anxiety.

### **Communication Apprehension**

Jung and McCroskey (2004) found that with nonnative English speakers learning English in the United States communication apprehension (CA) in the first language was a statistically significantly better predictor of second language CA than was communication competence in a second language. They also found that CA in the first language was a statistically significantly better predictor of

second language CA than years of speaking English. Lastly, they found that CA in the first language significantly predicted CA in the second language than time living in the U.S. Another interesting finding they found was that the temperament scores for extroversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism all significantly correlated with both first and second language CA.

Most students need some kind of bond before they can feel completely comfortable communicating with someone on a truly meaningful level (Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001). Spielmann and Radnofsky noted that separating cognitive and affective tension has important conceptual implications.

### **Anxiety, Self-Esteem & Self-Worth**

Anxiety could be tied to self-esteem (Arnold & Brown, 1999) on three levels: global or general self-esteem, situational self-esteem (i.e. referring to one's appraisals of oneself in specific situations, such as education or work), and task self-esteem. The greater our anxiety, the more aware we may be of it and, in turn, the more concerned we will be with our self-esteem (Gundykunst & Kim, 2001).

Contextual variables, such as when and where interactions take place as well as who is communicating with who have an affect on how willing a person is to communicate in a given situation (Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004). These authors also noted that self-confidence (as a combination of perceived communication competence and a lower level of anxiety) is critical for a person who is willing to communicate. Therefore, higher levels of motivation relate to self-confidence, which appear to result in willingness to communicate in a second language. Hashimoto (2002) also found that L2 anxiety was found to exert a strong and direct negative influence on perceived competence.

One could say that anxiety is not directly responsible for poor language performance, and the real trouble lies in improper or insufficient study (Covington, 1992). However, if after much effort a student fails, it could pose a major threat to that student's sense of self-worth. Students threatened by failure may become defensive and start making irrational goals or procrastinate which will lead to more study ineffectiveness. In the worst case scenario, the student may withdraw from their studies and simply give up. Conversely, if students try too hard in their studies, they may improve their performance, but they still have not directly dealt with their anxiety. It still may be present. What then, can a student do? There is no single intervention that is equally effective for dealing with the array of anxieties that exist. From a self-worth view, the biggest obstacle to effective intervention is the ego-threatening situation itself. Students need to be taught not only how to reduce anxiety, but also how to resist it. Students must eliminate the fear of failing to reduce anxiety and the threat of feeling worthless. Once the student can do this, anxiety will eventually evaporate without special intervention. Although direct attempts to elevate anxiety are useful, but eventually something needs to be done to get to the core issue of self-worth.

### **Strategies for coping with debilitating language anxiety**

Because language anxiety generally causes decrements in performance and undermines academic achievement, it is not surprising that educators, counselors, and psychologists have long looked for strategies for coping with it (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2006). Most of this attention, add Kondo and Ying-Ling, has centered on how to help students reduce anxiety rather than on what they are actually doing to cope with it. Coping will lead to anxiety reduction if it succeeds in eliminating the stressor or modifying the negative feelings associated with the stressor. It is having negative thoughts that lead to somatic anxiety symptoms, and for coping to be successful it must impact on the former

rather than the latter.

The question of what students actually do to cope with anxiety in their classrooms has received little attention (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). Kondo and Ying-Ling identified three intervention approaches to provide the basis for considering the types of strategies that students use to cope with their language anxiety. If students think that cognition (worry, preoccupations, and concerns) creates their anxiety, they may try to suppress or change their thought processes related to language learning. The cognitive approach assumes that the reason for anxiety is negative self-statements or thoughts inhibit language learning (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2006). If they believe their emotions (physiological responsiveness) is their main concern, they may attempt to relieve their stress and bodily tension. If they assume they have anxiety because they lack the required language skills, they may think they should study harder. In addition, if their anxiety is too high and unbearable, they may simple give up on their studies.

Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004) found that students identified 70 basic tactics for dealing with the anxiety they feel in English language classrooms. These 70 basic tactics cohered into five strategy categories (with their reported percentage of usage in parenthesis). The categories are as follows; Preparation (e.g. studying hard, 60.4%), Relaxation (e.g. taking a deep breath, 11.9%), Positive Thinking (e.g. imagining oneself giving a great performance, 26.2%), Peer Seeking (e.g. looking for others who are having difficulty controlling their anxiety, 11.4%), and Resignation (e.g. giving up, 28.2%).

These percentages do not add up to 100 because respondents could report multiple strategies. As one can see, Preparation is by far the most common anxiety coping strategy Kondo and Ying-Ling found that their students reported using. Preparation can be considered a behavioral strategy because it focuses on behavioral components of language learning that are related to effective



performance in class. Preparation, which is task-relevant in nature, add Kondo and Ying-Ling, was found to be used by students with high anxiety as frequently as by those with low anxiety. Some of the strategies that Kondo and Ying-Ling's students used included; I study hard. I prepare myself better. I ask for help from friends. I ask the teacher some questions. I practice English in my mind. I ask the teacher to speak more slowly. I try to guess the meaning of a difficult passage. I make it a habit of studying English every day.

In a later study, Kondo and Ying-Ling (2006) attempted to answer two key research questions:

RQ1: Are there differences in perceived effectiveness among Preparation, Relaxation, Positive Thinking, Peer Seeking, and Resignation?

RQ2: How is language anxiety related to the perceived effectiveness of Preparation, Relaxation, Positive Thinking, Peer Seeking, and Resignation?

Kondo and Ying-Ling found that affective strategies (i.e. Relaxation) are perceived to be more effective than cognitive or skills-oriented strategies and that students with lower language anxiety are characterized by more effective use of cognitive and skills-oriented strategies.

## **Summary**

This paper sought to offer a literature review on debilitating language anxiety as well as highlight some strategies for coping with debilitating language anxiety. A variety of research questions were posed. One of the aims of this paper was to look at how anxiety is defined in different areas of literature. This paper also looked at different types of anxiety and how they may relate to the language classroom. The actual existence of a 'language anxiety' is somewhat

tricky to prove. It very well could be that 'language anxiety' is merely a form of social anxiety and/or related to self-esteem and self-worth. All of these areas deserve further attention. Students could benefit from being schooled in strategies for coping with debilitating language anxiety so that their attempts at acquiring a second language can be more fruitful.

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