The Effects of Social and Language Anxiety on English Language Learners

John Paul White

ABSTRACT

This paper describes two forms of anxiety and suggests methods for reducing their negative influence within the context of teaching English to speakers of other languages. The author describes a case study in which attempts were made to inculcate confidence in an English language student displaying traits associated with social and language anxiety. The results of this case study are then discussed and recommendations are made for reducing the effects of social and language anxiety within a classroom environment.

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a feeling of worry or apprehension in response to an impending unpredictable outcome. It is a psychological defence reacting to a perceived threat and a desire to protect oneself from ridicule or harm. Individuals experiencing anxiety are likely to sweat, tremble, breathe heavily, or falter when making decisions. For these reasons, anxiety is generally considered a debilitating and crippling agency (Bystritsky, Khalsa, Cameron, & Schiffman, 2013).

There are various forms of anxiety, which makes it important to identify each type accurately. The first identifiable classification is social anxiety. This is the fear of being negatively evaluated or rejected by one's peers in social situations. Sufferers are likely to avoid social events, have difficulty integrating with others, or become anxious when placed in situations that require interaction with multiple people. However, individuals who suffer from social anxiety may still feel comfortable around familiar people such as friends and family (Rudaz, Ledermann, Margraf, Becker, & Craske, 2017). The second relevant classification is language anxiety. This retronym pertains to a subjective fear or apprehension associated with learning a second language. It can be the result of a previous negative experience, feeling incompetent in comparison to one's peers, a lack of motivation, or inadequate instruction in the L2.

Language anxiety can be separated into three subcategories - trait anxiety, situation-specific anxiety, and state anxiety. Trait anxiety has been described as 'a more permanent predisposition to be anxious' (Scovel, 1978, p. 137). Those of a nervous disposition typically fall into this category. By contrast, situation-specific anxiety manifests only as the result of a specific situation or event, for example, giving a presentation, taking a test, or public speaking (Hodapp, Glanzmann, & Laux (1995). Most people have experienced situation-specific anxiety at one point or another in their lives. State anxiety, however, is a temporary apprehension experienced at a particular moment in time. It differs from situation-specific anxiety in that it is not defined by a predetermined archetype and is rather down to an individual's interpretation of a sudden event being a threat. For instance, if one were to be asked to stand up and introduce themselves to a crowd of people without due warning (Spielberger, 1983).

Within the ESL community, there are conflicting views surrounding the relationship between language anxiety and second language learning. Many researchers believe that anxiety facilitates the learning process and is a concomitant of motivation. Others argue that anxiety has a negative effect on language learning and plays detriment to student performance. However, most hold the position that anxiety is the result of difficulties learning a language, fear of embarrassment, or feelings of inadequacy (Ellis, 2008).

For one semester, the author of this paper kept and maintained a teaching journal while teaching a group of eight 18-year-old students enrolled in Rikkyo University's English Discussion

Class (EDC). Journal entries were recorded using a reflection-in-action approach (Murphy, 2014) with the purpose of tracking the behaviour, performance, and improvement of one particular student who seemed ill at ease in class. This student exhibited signs of anxiety in specific situations and at particular points during lessons. For instance, in an activity that is a reduced version of Maurice's 4/3/2 Fluency (1983), the student stopped speaking and stood unsure of how to proceed. She looked lost, despondent and downhearted. It became a personal goal of this teacher to inculcate confidence and ameliorate any potential anxiety this student was feeling.

DISCUSSION

Case Study

The EDC course is compulsory for all freshman students at Rikkyo University. Classes are 90 minutes long and students are required to attend once a week for two consecutive semesters. The course aims to improve students' discussion skills and views Schmidt's (1992) definition of fluency as a vehicle for autonomous development (Hurling, 2012). A number of communication and discussion skills are introduced throughout the semester and students receive a grade based on their performance in two extended group discussions carried out without teacher intervention. As a result, teachers can expect to see varying levels of behaviour, performance, ability and motivation.

Although this case study focuses on one particular student, information and impressions were recorded in the journal with regard to all members of the class. This made it easy to review the dynamics of the class and compare the performance of each student. Moreover, in order to protect the identity of the eight students involved, their names have been replaced with colours; each colour being an aposematism of their perceived level of class confidence. For instance, the more extrovert students were assigned bolder colour labels while the more introvert students were given softer colours. The names of these students also appear in climatic order with the subject of this case study appearing last.

Through the teacher's observations over the course of a 14-week semester, the more extrovert students were identified as: Ms. Brown, Mr. Red, Ms. Orange, and Ms. Purple. From this group, Ms. Brown was the most outspoken member of the class. She was often the first to speak in activities and could be described as slightly overweening or cocky. Mr. Red was from China and attended international school from a young age. As a result, he was a capable English speaker who regularly made efforts to talk with his teacher before class. Ms. Orange was more subdued, yet no less competent. She listened attentively and had no trouble implementing class feedback. She often appeared frazzled and busy. Ms. Purple was good-natured and friendly. She was someone that other members of the class looked to for support. For instance, when students were unable to attend class they messaged Ms. Purple to inform me of their absence.

The more introvert students in descending order were: Ms. Yellow, Ms. Green, Ms. Blue, and Ms. Pink. Within this group, Ms. Yellow could be considered the most talkative. Although she had a happy-go-lucky attitude, she seemed a little more composed than her aforementioned peers. She spoke at a relatively low volume and it was often difficult to hear what she was saying. Ms. Green was amiable, yet reserved. She paid attention to whoever was speaking and always appeared interested in what others had to say. Ms. Blue was regal in her posture and mannerisms. She sat bolt upright and waited for others to ask for her opinion rather than offering it freely. She displayed little emotion but participated well in activities. Finally, the main subject of this case study, Ms. Pink, seemed to clam up in certain activities and become nervous when put under pressure. Her motivation appeared lower than the rest of the class and her speaking volume was almost inaudible. The teacher was Mr. White - the author of this paper.

Body Language, Communication Skills, and Social Skills

It would be impossible to say for certain whether Ms. Pink was truly anxious in class. However, there were aspects of Ms. Pink's behaviour that created the impression of anxiety and in turn had an effect on her performance. For instance, she made little eye contact, did not face her classmates when they were speaking, and was an overall passive interlocutor.

With this in mind, her behaviour was broken into three main principles for improvement: body language, communication skills, and social skills. Body language was delineated by the non-verbal and physical behaviour in which her attitude was communicated. For example, whether she sat facing other members of the group, maintained eye contact when speaking or listening, and her static posture. Communication skills were concerned with her ability to communicate as a speaker, the audibility of her speaking volume, how much time she spent speaking, and if she expanded on her ideas by giving reasons and examples. Social skills regarded her ability to engage others as a listener, for example, how often she initiated interactions, encouraged others to speak, and her ability to show interest by use of rejoinders or asking follow-up questions.

Body Language: Sit up, Look and Listen

From the very first lesson, there was a clear need for improvement with regard to Ms. Pink's body language. For instance, she rarely faced her classmates, struggled to make eye contact, and often sat slumped with her hair covering her face. She also sat idly staring at the pages of her textbook during pair work activities. This made it hard for her classmates to engage her in discussion and left them unsure whether she needed more time to respond or was merely using the textbook as a prop to avoid participation.

To counter this, the students were instructed to close their textbooks and to maintain eye contact whenever speaking or listening. The discussion questions were affixed to the whiteboard and all other distractions were removed from the desks. As a result, the students only broke eye contact when turning their heads to read the questions from the whiteboard.

Although this method appeared to benefit all of the students, there was a particularly noticeable improvement in Ms. Pink's eye contract, posture, and participation in all subsequent pair work activities. She seemed more relaxed and appeared to find it easier to speak to certain members of the group (specifically the more introverted; Ms. Purple, Ms. Yellow, Ms. Green and Ms. Blue). However, she still displayed a comparatively lower degree of participation during group work activities or when speaking to the more extroverted members of the class.

For instance, the most difficult member of the class for Ms. Pink to work with was Ms. Brown, as she tended to dominate discussions. In such cases, Ms. Pink made no attempt to gain control of discussions and would only speak when asked a question. It was clear that more work was needed with regard to showing interest, however, it was decided that this could be addressed in later lessons so as not to overwhelm her at this point of the course.

Communication: Speak Longer

At the start of each lesson, students are required to complete a truncated version of Maurice's 4/3/2 fluency activity (1983) with each section being reduced by 1 minute – making it a 3/2/1 fluency. The students begin this activity by lining up in pairs facing each other. Four students take the role of the 'speakers' while the other four students take the role of 'listeners.' The speakers begin by reading two questions that have been affixed to the whiteboard and answer these questions aloud within a time frame of three minutes. The listeners are instructed not to ask any questions that might derail the speakers' utterances. After the first three minutes, the listeners are rotated and the speakers repeat the same content to a new listener for two minutes. Once this is done, the listeners are rotated for a final time and the speakers repeat everything within one minute to their final

listener - hence the name '3/2/1 Fluency.' After the speakers have finished, the listener and speaker roles are reversed and it becomes the listeners turn to speak. This allows each student a total of six minutes speaking time during the 3/2/1 Fluency activity.

In the second lesson of the semester, Ms. Pink seemed to be having trouble speaking for the full three minutes of the first round of the 3/2/1 Fluency and stood silently until the clock ran out. This clearly had an emotional effect on her and she looked noticeably embarrassed.

In order to increase Ms. Pink's speaking time for the second round of the 3/2/1 Fluency, the conjunctions "but, so, and, because" were written on the whiteboard. The students were praised for speaking English during the first round and were told that they would now speak for the full two minutes of the second round using the conjunctions on the board. This feedback was intentionally framed as an additional instruction to the preceding activity in order to avoid it looking as though Ms. Pink had failed in any way during the first round. An example of how to expand using these conjunctions was modelled by the teacher and the students were then told to continue with the second round of the 3/2/1 Fluency. As expected, Ms. Pink used all of the conjunctions in the second round and appeared much less anxious. She was also able to speak for longer in later lessons using the same method and never had trouble expanding on her ideas.

Communication: Speak Louder
Ms. Pink, as intimated above, spoke at an almost inaudible level. This was evident from the posture adopted by her peers who had cause to lean forward, cup their ears, or turn their heads whenever she was speaking. Apparently unaware of these non-verbal cues, Ms. Pink made no effort to speak any louder. She would merely repeat herself when asked and if her repetition was not heard; her classmates would estimate what she had said and respond accordingly.

Ms. Pink, however, was not the only softly spoken student. Ms. Yellow, Ms. Green, Ms. Purple and Ms. Blue also spoke at very low volumes and it was often hard to hear them over the louder voices of Ms. Brown and Mr. Red. To encourage all of the students to speak at a louder volume, the classroom tables and chairs were moved apart from each other. The students were then shown how to project their voices by aiming at least two feet behind the head of their intended audience. At first, Ms. Brown and Mr. Red were the only students able to do this effectively while the remaining students leant across their desks in an effort to hear one another. However, the students eventually realised that it was far easier to project their voices than to perch precariously on their chairs and the quieter students began to speak at a more audible volume. By the third lesson, speaking volume was no longer an issue and the classroom tables were returned to their original layout.

Social Skills: Speak First
To encourage Ms. Pink to start discussions, a system was devised to identify which students were most likely to speak first in activities. To better achieve this purpose, the students' names were written in the teaching journal in two columns of four. Then, at the start of each pair work activity, connecting lines were drawn between the names of each pair in order to indicate which students would be working together, as in Figure 1:
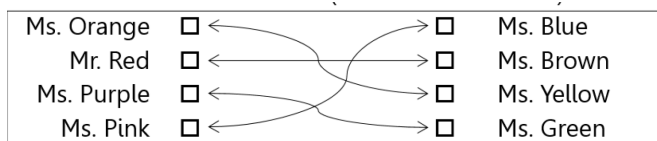

Figure 1. Practice Activity – Student Pairings

This made it easy to record which student had been the first to speak during an activity by quickly marking the box next to their name, as in Figure 2:
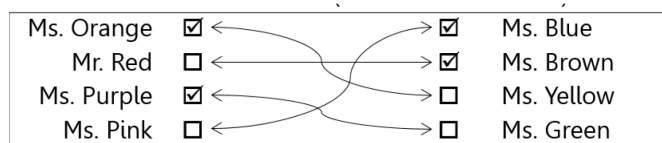

Figure 2. Practice Activity – Round 1 (five-minute discussion)

This information was later used to pair the more introverted students with other less-dominant members of the class for Round 2 of the same activity. Thus, forcing the more introverted students to start discussions by way of attrition. It also provided a visual record of which students had started discussions throughout the entire semester. An example of how students would be assigned new partners can be seen in the connecting lines of Figure 3:
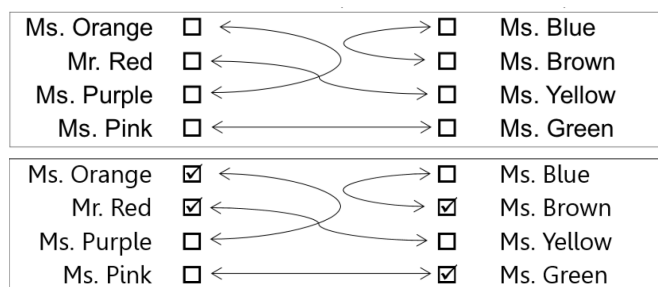

Figure 3. Practice Activity – Round 2 (five-minute discussion)

On review of the teaching journal, it is evident that starting discussions proved most challenging for Ms. Pink. She rarely initiated any form of interaction and would usually wait for her classmates to start a discussion. She also failed to attend a few of the lessons aimed specifically at addressing or reviewing this issue. As such, she ended the course displaying little improvement with regard to speaking first or starting discussions.

Social Skills: Show Interest

In a similar regard to not wanting to start discussions, Ms. Pink also made little attempt to keep them going. She never asked follow-up questions, rarely used active listening phrases, and instead just sat either looking nervous or vaguely smiling as her classmates spoke.

For the purposes of a discussion course that requires students to interact with one another and has active participation as a key assessment criterion, this was an imposing issue that needed remedy. The students were regularly reminded to focus on asking others for opinions rather than worry about sharing their own, to be 'active listeners' by use of rejoinders, and were encouraged to work together using the acronym T.E.A.M (Together Everyone Achieves More) in order to have balanced discussions as a group.

For the most part, this method worked - with the exception of Ms. Pink who made little attempt to listen actively or ask questions. While efforts were made to elucidate this point through general class feedback, a more bespoke method of feedback had to be taken and Ms. Pink was directly told that she needed to ask more follow-up questions to other members of the class. After being reminded multiple times, Ms. Pink began to show interest by asking questions and gained

control over some of the class discussions that she was involved in.

CONCLUSION

General opinion has started to make out that the teacher should be nothing more than a facilitator in the English language classroom. However, it is clear the teacher has a much larger role to play and the importance of building rapport with students is often overlooked. By creating a welcoming environment, students are more likely to feel comfortable expressing themselves when discussing a variety of topics together in a foreign language.

At the start of the semester, Ms. Pink seemed incredibly nervous in certain situations and with particular people. However, through repeated exposure to the situations that potentially made her anxious, the support of her peers, and her own hard work - she was able to build confidence and share her ideas on a range of topics. It is regrettable that she continued to have difficulty starting discussions or showing interest, although perhaps this can be attributed to her lack of attendance in lessons aimed at addressing these issues. For the same reason, she also missed out on a variety of activities crafted with her specific needs in mind. In the future, hopefully she will be able to overcome these hurdles and realise that proficiency in anything comes through exploration and failure. There is really nothing to fear.

REFERENCES

Bystritsky, A., Khalsa, S. S., Cameron, M. E., & Schiffman, J. (2013). Current diagnosis and treatment of anxiety disorders. *Pharmacy and Therapeutics*, *38*(1), 30–57.

Ellis, R. (2008) The Study of Second Language Acquisition (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Hodapp, V., Glanzmann, P. G., & Laux, L. (1995). Theory and measurement of test anxiety as a situation-specific trait. In C. D. Spielberger & P. R. Vagg (Eds.), *Series in clinical and community psychology. Test anxiety: Theory, assessment, and treatment* (pp. 47-58). Philadelphia, PA: Taylor & Francis.

Hurling, S. (2012). Introduction to EDC. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion, 1*(1), 1.2-1.9

Maurice, K. (1983). The fluency workshop. *TESOL Newsletter, 17*(4), 429.

Murphy, J. M. (2014). Reflective teaching: Principles and practices. In M. Celce-Murcia, D. M. Brinton, & M. A. Snow (Eds.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (4th edition) (pp. 613-629). Boston, MA: Heinle Cengage.

Rudaz, M., Ledermann, T., Margraf, J., Becker, E. S., & Craske, M. G. (2017). The moderating role of avoidance behaviour on anxiety over time: Is there a difference between social anxiety disorder and specific phobia? *PLoS ONE*, *12*(7), 1-14.

Schmidt, R. (1992). Psychological mechanisms underlying second language fluency. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 14¸* 357-385.

Scovel, T. (1978). The effect of affect on foreign language learning: a review of the anxiety research. *Language Learning, 28*, 129-42.

Spielberger, C. (1983). *Manual for the state-trait anxiety inventory (form Y)*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.