

Research Notes

Reasonable Doses of Anxiety are Not Necessarily to be Feared

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Anxiety, or “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with the arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (Spielberger, 1983), is generally regarded as something to be avoided in the language classroom. Teachers typically take care to limit the amount of anxiety that learners experience. This is not unreasonable given that research has consistently shown that high levels of anxiety can negatively affect learners’ target language (TL) performance and proficiency gains (MacIntyre, 1995; Dörnyei, 2005). However, not all of the correlates of anxiety are negative. For example, the experience of moderate levels of anxiety may lead to greater effort (Scovel, 1978), the achievement of higher course grades (Chastain, 1975), or the oral production of difficult target language structures (Kleinmann, 1977).

This short research summary suggests one other way in which learners experiencing anxiety can be positive: It may result in an overall reduction of anxiety over time in certain situations. In other words, an effective way to reduce anxiety is to experience anxiety.

I came to this conclusion while analyzing data for a larger study of university EFL students in Japan (Delaney, 2009). In this study, I investigated the relationships between a number of learner characteristics (extraversion, anxiety, learner beliefs, and target language proficiency) and the quantity and quality of learners’ participation in class. The participants took pre- and post-measures of the learner characteristics, and these results were correlated with measures

of learners’ oral participation in class. Then, at the end of the study, the measures of participation were correlated with the post-measures of learner characteristics to see if participation was related to changes in any of these variables. The participants were divided into two groups that were almost identical in terms of the instruction they received with one exception: One group participated in a series of 30-minute whole-class discussions, while the other group did not.

Findings

First, I was not surprised to find that learners who reported high levels of anxiety on the pre-measure participated significantly less than less anxious learners. On the other hand, it was a bit surprising that there was no significant relationship between anxiety and the quality (accuracy, complexity, or fluency) of learners’ participation. Watching the classroom videos, it appears that the anxious learners compensated for the negative cognitive effects of anxiety with greater preparation and effort; they can frequently be seen writing or practicing their participation with a partner before contributing. This could be interpreted as an example of facilitative anxiety (Scovel, 1978).

However, I did not anticipate that the group of learners who participated in the whole-class discussions would exhibit a significant decrease in anxiety on the post-measure, while the other group did not. The two groups were demographically very similar (all were 18-19 year old Japanese university students) and, aside from the

whole-class discussion activities, the two groups received identical instruction using the same teacher, textbook, activities, and task formats (e.g., pair and small group work). It seemed that something about participating in the whole-class discussions led to a reduction in anxiety.

The whole-class discussion task was initially chosen for this study as a means of gauging learners' readiness to participate when they were not required to do so. In contrast to pair and group work activities that tend to oblige learners to participate (it is rude not to reply when someone is speaking directly to you), the whole-class discussion task could gauge learners' participation when they were in a position to choose freely whether or not to participate. I never called on any students to participate during the discussions. Given my experience with the population of learners investigated in this study, it was with some trepidation that I decided to use this task. I wondered whether *anyone* would say *anything*. The frequently lengthy periods of silence in the whole-class discussions could be quite uncomfortable, and I was often secretly glad when discussion time was finished. Therefore, I found it surprising when the results of this study suggested that this task had some real benefits.

While the significant reduction in anxiety among learners who participated in the whole-class discussions was not anticipated, it does make sense that learners who participate in more anxiety-inducing tasks might get used to them and therefore experience a reduction in anxiety over time. Stepping forward and speaking in front of the whole class is probably one of the more anxiety-provoking things one can do in a language class, and most of the learners did participate at least a few times. The implications of this are (a) that anxiety can be reduced, and (b) that one way to reduce anxiety is to be exposed to it; that is, learners who are asked to participate in anxiety-inducing tasks (within reason) are likely to become accustomed to the anxiety, adapt to it, and overcome it to some extent. The practical implication of this finding is that while

teachers should be sensitive to their learners' needs, they need not always make shielding their students from anxiety the primary consideration in the design of lessons or materials.

Once teachers are confident that students are sufficiently secure with the class, the teacher, and each other, it is fine to present them with difficult material and tasks prudently and judiciously. Indeed, language learning is inherently ego threatening, so most learners cannot avoid some level of anxiety. The teacher's task is to avoid inducing too much of it while challenging learners in pedagogically effective ways.

References

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