

6. (French) Learners' Anxiety. How can the Teacher Help?

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Abstract

As a language teacher in the private sector, I have often met students with very negative feelings about learning English. I've asked myself about the roots of such negativity, and in 1997 I decided to look deeper into the matter. This is a report on a case study I carried out in France during which I particularly wanted to highlight the possible causes of students' anxiety, and to describe remedies teachers can resort to in such cases.

My case study was based on a set of hypotheses:

1. The possibility that students' negativity stems from anxiety
2. And the possibility that anxiety stems from previous unsuccessful language learning experiences

First things first: what is anxiety? Anxiety, like any other psychological construct isn't at all easy to define. Simplifying somewhat, anxiety can be said to group feelings of discomfort, insecurity and resistance associated with the process of learning English. There are two types of anxiety: one type facilitates our task, and might actually even help us perform better. Another type debilitates in that it creates difficulties and might even make it hard or impossible for us to accomplish the task at hand.

Debilitative anxiety was obviously the subject of my investigation. Language proficiency was not an aim of the study.

The study

Phase One

Folk wisdom in France maintains that the French are rather dissatisfied with the quality of their English language training in school. In an attempt to investigate this assumption, I handed out a questionnaire (drafted in French) to 200 students and past students from different age groups and gender, in different areas of France. Out of 143 respondents, 110 said they did not like the way they were taught

English in school. The reasons mentioned were (in no particular order): the teacher's poor language skills, too much emphasis on form and written language, class size, pressure from their teachers. Forty-five people said they felt anxious at the thought of learning English again and were unwilling to take a second shot at it.

Phase two

The next phase involved the selection and interview of two students among the ones who were enrolled at my school. The two students I chose had both had English training in school, and were clearly nervous about being in class again. At the time they both worked for the same international company, and they had been asked to boost their level of English by their respective managers.

I interviewed them (in French) on their school experiences, and asked them to explain why they felt so negative. The reasons for their discomfort were: fear of making errors, their past teachers' behavior and in particular the error feedback techniques used by their previous teachers.

The language used by the students interviewed was very colorful and clearly betrayed their feelings: '*elle nous a braqué*', (It was like the teacher was shooting at us.). One of them recalled her teacher saying '*si c'est pour dire des bêtises, il vaut mieux se taire*' (If you only want to make mistakes, you would be better off not saying anything at all.) Another student lamented: '*nous étions obligés de copier la liste de verbes irréguliers à chaque fois qu'on faisait une faute*' (We had to copy over the list of irregular verbs every time someone made a mistake.)

It is not hard to see how as a consequence of this, students may end up thinking they're losers. This creates very low self-esteem, and they thus develop the feeling they'll never get to learn the language. It clearly was the case of these two students.

Apart from the poor communication skills of their previous teachers, two other factors triggered the anxiety of these students. The first factor is that their previous teachers developed little or no teacher-student rapport. There's much anecdotal evidence to support the view that more often than not, language teachers within the French National Education system fail to establish rapport with their students. This leads to the neglect of student emotional needs and to student frustration.

When this is the case, the lesson follows the proverbial empty vessel model. This is what Paulo Freire has famously termed the *banking concept* of education. The second factor worth taking into account is the teachers' failure to address the needs of those students who do not seem to learn like the others.

Phase three

The students were asked to keep a diary and record their feelings after each class.

Because language proficiency was not an objective of the study, and because the students' low level may have been an unnecessary obstacle, the students were asked to write in their diaries in French.

Phase four

The students were then interviewed at the end of their course for feedback.

Results

Both the interviews and the diaries revealed that the students had lowered their anxiety levels through the rapport they established with their teacher, the teacher's gentle ways of providing feedback and the stress-free atmosphere of the class.

Conclusions

While obviously no big claims can be made, I believe that nonetheless the study has some important pedagogical implications:

1. *Teachers should be well aware of the importance of dealing with the human being AND the learner.*

Teachers should not be too busy addressing the needs of the learner and thereby forgetting to establish *rapport* with the human being.

2. *Teachers should be more concerned by the quality of their discourse, and not just the quantity.*

Apart from more strictly pedagogic purposes, teacher talk serves other purposes as well. Teacher talk should forge a link with the students. Teachers should show their interest in their students.

3. Teachers must take the students' different intelligences (and styles) into account.

We don't all learn the same way, and we're unique in that we use different intelligences. I believe teachers should be trained to accommodate individual differences in their teaching.

So, in short, teachers should engage themselves in a process of first recognizing individual differences. Next teachers must get involved in a talent assessment, i.e. finding out what areas their students are strongest in. Finally teachers should use this information to build on the students' strengths. **Catching the student at their best:** this I think should be any teacher's motto regardless of the discipline taught.

When students are particularly anxious, teachers should add even more support. They should use pedagogical placebos by occasionally proposing material lower than the level of the student. They should give the student added support. When it comes to error feedback teachers must be particularly careful with anxious students. Finally when it comes to listening tasks, teachers must make sure that the input is comprehensible as incomprehensible input is a tremendous source of anxiety for many students.

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