EFFECTS OF ANXIETY ON LISTENING PERFORMANCE AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING LISTENING TEACHING

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Abstract
Currently, in the study of second language acquisition, affective factors have attracted more and more attention with anxiety being one of the most important components. In my teaching, I find among most college students high level anxiety in listening classes which casts a great negative influence on the improvement of their listening ability. To better the situation, I conducted a teaching experiment with the purpose of which was to find out the causes for anxiety in listening classes to attempt new teaching techniques in light of second language acquisition theories and teaching conditions in China, and to help the students give full play to their language potentials in a most favorable affective state so as to gradually improve their capacity of language use.

1 Introduction

In recent years, more and more L2 researchers have taken learner variables, especially affective factors into consideration because students are "physical/cognitive but primarily emotional beings" (Rogers, see Brown 1987). Among the affective factors influencing language learning, anxiety ranks high. Arnold (1999) finds its importance has led to significant researches and discussions from different perspectives.

Psychologically speaking, anxiety refers to the intense and enduring negative feeling caused by vague and dangerous stimuli from the outside as well as the unpleasant emotional experiences involved such as anticipation, irritation and fear. See Wen Weiping 1998. Gardner and MacIntyre 1993. See Arnold 1999. Special refer to language anxiety as "fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language".


On the basis of these studies, a few teaching methods concerning reducing language anxiety have come into being. For example, suggestopaedia, community language learning, total physical response, etc. These are termed as humanistic approaches the common concern of which is that in language teaching, learners' affective demands should be satisfied and a relaxing atmosphere created.

However, when we examine EFL teaching in China, we find things dissatisfactory especially in terms of listening. It is found that in most high schools, English class is taught centered and exam oriented, and that listening is usually ignored or abandoned. Therefore, even if the students enter college after six or even more years of English learning, they still feel frustrated when required to communicate in English in class. What is worse, many teachers do not take these feelings into consideration in the course of teaching which results in the aggravation of nervousness, uneasiness and even fear.
As a teacher of English majors, I have noticed this problem for long and have been trying to improve the current situation in order to obtain some precise data. I conducted an experiment with the aim of working out some feasible teaching techniques to reduce anxiety in Chinese EFL listening classes. The present paper is an attempt to address the following questions:

1. What are the possible causes for listening anxiety?
2. Can listening anxiety be reduced?
3. How can the teacher improve teaching techniques and soften classroom atmosphere in order to better the students' performance?

2 Management of Anxiety in Listening Class — An Experiment

The subjects chosen for the study are thirty English freshmen in Shandong University of Science and Technology. The experiment began in October 2002 and lasted for three months consisting of three stages: pretest, application of new techniques, and posttest.

Stage 1 Pretest Observation and Questionnaires

The observation lasted for about one month. The purpose of which was to find out the external or physical response of anxiety in listening class. The whole procedure was conducted in a natural setting in order to observe the subjects' natural expression. Careful examination and recording showed that most subjects experienced high anxiety in listening class which resulted in dull atmosphere, poor performance, low efficiency and low spirits on both the teacher and the students.

Two sets of questionnaires see Appendix I and Appendix II were used. One to evaluate the level intensity of the subjects' anxiety, the other to find out the causes of anxiety. The results from the questionnaires statistically revealed that most subjects experienced high anxiety in listening class. See Figure 1 which corresponded to the conclusion from the observation.

Stage 2 Application of new teaching techniques to reduce anxiety

The observation and pretest offered a clear picture of the students' level of listening anxiety and its causes. Then, on the basis of years of teaching experience, I tried out several teaching techniques accordingly.

I] Relaxing classroom atmosphere

Just as Zankov See Wen Weiping 1998:216 has pointed out, a teacher should make the students learn in an unconstrained atmosphere where both the students and the teacher can breathe freely and if such an atmosphere is not created, no teaching method will work. To create such an easy atmosphere, I adopted such techniques as music appreciation, free talk, humorous talk, free feedback and listening in games, all contributing to changing the students' moods in listening class.

2 Improving listening contents

Jeremy Harmer 1998:100 puts forward six principles behind the teaching of listening and one of them says: Students should be encouraged to respond to the content of a listening not just to the language. I improved listening contents in terms of exercise forms supplementary knowledge and choice of proper materials.

3 Error correction

In a research program carried out by Jeremy Harmer 1998:2 concerning “What makes a good teacher?” some of the responses come like this: A good teacher should be able to correct people without offending them. Therefore, like transferring new knowledge, correction also requires skills. In response to different situations, I adopted self-correction, mutual correction, mass correction, and semi-negative evaluation respectively.

4 Psychological instructions

Compared with other techniques, psychological instructions are more direct.

For commonly felt anxiety, I tried to give all the students some instructions together such as “I can learn English well.” “No mistakes, no language.” “Nobody will laugh at me.” We are friends.” I do better this time than last time.” Etc. While for those who had extremely high anxiety or some special anxiety, I gave them some personal instructions. First, I talked to them in private and gave them corresponding instructions to comfort them. And in class, I left easier questions for them to make them experience success. In this way their self-confidence grew little by little.

Stage 3 Posttest

After two months of experiment with new
techniques I made another observation and conducted another survey with Questionnaire III the same with Questionnaire I and Questionnaire IV see Appendix III.

3 Findings

When all the data from the two phases of observation and four questionnaires are collected and compared respectively the following significant findings are revealed.

1 Findings in observation

A comparison shows that anxiety in listening class has reduced obviously in terms of both the students' individual response and the classroom atmosphere. Both the teacher and the students respond that listening class is easier to go on than before and that no one feels as nervous or worried as before. Most students express their willingness to have listening class since they have regarded it as an important way of acquiring language as well as enjoying themselves.

2 Findings from Questionnaires I and III

The comparison between the results of the two questionnaires with the help of five-point Likert scale demonstrates obvious difference Figure 1.

![Graph](image)

From the above figures we see the average anxiety intensity in the post-test is obviously lower than that of the pre-test. The mean score for the pre-test is 4.64 with the highest point of 4 while the mean score for the post-test decreases to 4.94 with the highest point of 7. The figures show clearly that after the experiment with new teaching techniques the students' anxiety has ideally reduced which confirms the result of comparison between the two phases of observation. Although the students still have relatively high anxiety somewhere.

3 Findings from Questionnaires II and IV

The comparison between the two questionnaires shows that the answers in Questionnaire IV are included in those in Questionnaire II. This means that the students do not feel high anxiety in some aspects mentioned in the pre-test but in others which exactly explains why in the post-test figure there are still some rather high points. Those high points reveal the area where the teacher should continue to explore.

4 Discussion Possible Answers to Three Questions

The data analysis reveals some distinct changes in the subjects therefore offering the possible answers to the three preset questions.

Question 1 What are the major causes for anxiety in listening class?

The following causes are detected in the study.

1 Learner's causes

Past experience

Among the 30 subjects 23 mention that past experience plays a very important part in the formation of listening anxiety. Some reflect that they now feel anxious because they had never had any listening course before entering college. Others report listening anxiety because they doubt they have a comparatively poor English foundation. The more doubtful they are the less confident they become and the higher their anxiety grows.

Tolerance of ambiguity and learner beliefs

20 students hold the belief that they should grasp every word and detail of the listening material. Otherwise it is not counted as full and perfect understanding. When they finally come to see this belief almost unrealistic they feel frustrated and anxious.
Self-esteem
16 students report they often feel inferior to their classmates and care much about what others think about them. As is suggested by Price 1991 unsuccessful language learners often have lower self-esteem than successful ones.

Teacher causes
Instructor beliefs
Many language teachers maintain that they should be directive authoritarian and even intimidating. Young 1991 Most of the students report that they experience much anxiety when they feel the teacher holds the above beliefs.

Attitude
14 students mention that they are greatly influenced by whether the teacher treats everyone equally. They report that when the teacher always gives chances to certain students who can offer satisfactory answers they feel the existence of prejudice. With the growth of these feelings their anxiety increases.

Classroom activities
Koch and Terrell 1991 see Arnold 1999 found that being called on to respond orally was anxiety producing. Most of the students mention that they experience high anxiety when they are asked individually.

Evaluation
12 students report anxiety because they fear that the teacher may evaluate them only by the results of examination. And in class if they cannot respond satisfactorily or always ask questions they fear that the teacher will regard them as foolish.

Environmental causes
Competitiveness
Anxiety is aroused when language learners compare themselves to others which can rarely attain Bailey 1983. When the students come into college they necessarily face greater competition than in high school. And when they meet with any frustration or failure they begin doubting whether they can do as well as others.

Evaluation
As for why they do not volunteer to respond in class some students reply that they do not want to become others' laughingstock because of their incorrect answers. I was quite frightened when asked questions again I fear lest I give the wrong answer and will be the laughingstock of the class maybe I felt really stupid and helpless in class Ellis 1994. This is a vivid description of their anxious feelings.

Question 2: Can anxiety in listening class be reduced?
Successful examples of managing anxiety in second language acquisition are found in the literature Gardner Smythe Brunet 1977 Descrochers Gardner 1981 In the present study the comparisons of observation results and questionnaire data also prove that it is possible to reduce listening anxiety by means of applying proper teaching techniques as treatment. Figure 2 shows the degree of decrease in comparison with the ideal range.

Figure 2: Decrease of Anxiety in the Present Study

It is clear that after only two months of treatment with new teaching techniques most students anxiety has shifted from debilitating to facilitating which means the experiment has achieved its planned goal. It proves that anxiety in listening class can be effectively reduced.

Question 3: How can the teacher improve teaching techniques and soften classroom atmosphere?

The very fact that most students' listening anxiety has been successfully controlled proves that the above techniques are useful and feasible as they are applied in view of the causes for anxiety that have been found out in the observation and the questionnaires.

5. Implications for Listening Teaching in China

Listening anxiety has been discussed as partly rooted in teaching where there is still much room for improvement.

1. Syllabus design
The first concept in syllabus design is that listening should go together with other skills from the very beginning of English learning. Therefore, when English course is initially offered, listening should be part of it. The second concept is that the aim of listening course is to improve the listening skill of the student not only to pass examinations. Therefore, the listening contents should be diversified instead of consisting only of dull test items.

Improvement of teachers qualities
As is suggested by the present study, listening anxiety can be reduced to a certain extent with the help of certain techniques executed by the teacher. So, language class requires a lot of the teacher's study of teaching theories and methodology.

To be a good teacher, rich knowledge of language and experience of teaching are necessary but not all. What he needs more is linguistic psychological and pedagogical theories which can dominate and guide his teaching practice.

Formation of proper beliefs
As has been discussed, traditional teaching methods set the teacher to be the authority and center of the class. He “stands at the front of the class like a puppet master or mistress controlling everything.” Harmer 1991 235 Such a role builds up a “wall” between the teacher and the students which prevents the latter from free and active behaviors in class. To change this situation, the teacher should shift his role from a controller and authority towards that of a facilitator. Figure 3 who maintains a low profile in order to make the students own achievement of a task possible. Harmer 1991 235

Application of proper teaching techniques
“...the most important thing a teacher can do to help students emotionally and intellectually is to create an environment of mutual support and care...” The crucial thing is the safety and encouragement students sense in the classroom. Canfield & Wells 1994 35 see Arnold 1999 212. The teacher can use any or all of the following suggestions for diminishing anxiety in listening class:

- Boost the self-esteem and self-confidence of students by providing multiple opportunities for classroom success in listening;
- Reduce the competition in the classroom;
- Give students permission to respond with less than perfect performance;
- Give positive evaluation frequently;
- Correct mistakes without humiliating the student;
- Ask questions without intimidation;

Enhancement of good professional ethics
It is much easier to be a teacher than to be a good teacher. The biggest difference between the two is the level of professional ethics.

A good teacher should
- look upon the students as human beings whose first demand is affect;
- try to fully understand his students including the mastery of such information as their educational background and difficulties;
- be fair-minded offering equal chances to all the students who expect this;
- be patient;
- be encouraging;
- be creative;
- and be open-minded and easy to approach.

All in all, these professional ethics will enable the teacher to “not only understand himself better but also be an effective teacher” who having set the optimal stage an context for learning will succeed in the goals of education.” Brown 1987 171

Cultivation of students psychological quality
Students are the center and subject of teaching and learning activities. The final purpose of whatever the teacher does is to make the students adjust their affective state. In this sense, the students play a vital role in the management of anxiety. Anyhow, the
teacher can help guide the students in the following aspects:

Tell the students to bravely face listening anxiety and make them understand that it is natural to feel anxiety in the process of language learning. They should firmly believe that time and hard work will help reduce their anxiety.

Teach the students ways of adjusting their state of mind.

Tell the students to strengthen their confidence and motivation consciously.

Help the students establish realistic goals and predict possible difficulties.

Help the students evaluate themselves appropriately.

Form an atmosphere of unity and mutual aid among all the students.

6 Conclusion

The present study is based on second language acquisition theories and years of teaching practice. It was designed to investigate the reasons for language learning anxiety and how to deal with it, with the help of experimental and research information. Finally, it was found that anxiety plays a negative role in listening and that it is caused by a variety of factors. The teacher is able to reduce it to a certain extent with the help of certain teaching techniques in listening class.

Therefore, every language teacher should hold the belief that anxiety is inborn and commonly existent but that with their efforts of creating a low-anxiety atmosphere in class, it can be effectively managed. And it is the teachers' responsibility to develop the students' capacity of language use in a comfortable atmosphere. In addition, it is high time that the traditional exam-oriented and teacher-centered teaching methods were changed into those emphasizing the students' overall competence.

References

Appendix I

QUESTIONNAIRE

Name ____________________________ Class ____________________________

Directions: This is a questionnaire which will help you solve some problems with your listening ability. Here are 15 statements to test your state of emotion in listening class. After each statement there are five choices marked 1 (Strongly disagree) 2 (Disagree) 3 (Undecided) 4 (Agree) 5 (Strongly agree). Omitted hereafter.

[ ] 1. I do not volunteer to answer questions because I am afraid the teacher may be angry with me if I give the wrong answer.
[ ] 2. I strongly disagree.
[ ] 3. I disagree.
[ ] 4. I am undecided.
[ ] 5. I agree.
[ ] 6. I strongly agree.

[ ] 2. When listening to English, even one unclear word can make me nervous so that I cannot go on listening.
[ ] 3. When the teacher asks questions, I dare not look at him in case he calls me.
[ ] 4. I am always worried that I cannot do well in listening.
[ ] 5. The thought of listening arouses untold fear inside me.
[ ] 6. I always feel nervous on exams because I think exams is the way the teacher evaluates me.
[ ] 7. I always feel nervous upon entering the language lab.

References
Appendix II

**QUESTIONNAIRE II**

**Name:** [Blank]

**Class:** [Blank]

Directions: This is another questionnaire which will help you with your listening. Here are 4 questions to reflect your state of emotion in listening class. Please answer each of them according to your own experience.

1. What does listening mean to you?
2. To what do you pay most of your attention in listening class?
3. In what ways do you think English class at college is different from that in your middle school?
4. Are you satisfied with your listening class? Why or why not?

Appendix III

**QUESTIONNAIRE IV**

**Name:** [Blank]

**Class:** [Blank]

Directions: This is another questionnaire which will help you with your listening. Here are 3 questions to reflect your present state of emotion in listening class. Please answer each of them totally according to your own experience.

1. What do you pay attention to when listening?
2. Are you satisfied with your listening class? Why or why not?
3. What is the biggest change in your view of listening class?

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