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## **REFLECTIONS ON HIDDEN VOICES IN THE EFL CLASSROOM: THE “ANXIOUS” LEARNER AND THE “CARING” TEACHER**

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### **Abstract**

*A number of research studies have attempted to investigate the major learning-teaching complexities of EFL classrooms. The role of affect in general, and language anxiety in particular received considerable attention in educational research. For most teachers, it is likely challenging to put theories of affect in learning into practice. That challenge stems from the fact that every educational setting is unique of its own complexities. Specifically, the anxious language learner might have difficulties in verbalizing his or her thoughts in class. Some learners would decide not to contribute in class and keep their “hidden voices” inaudible for a long time. As such, the aim of this paper is to share and provide tentative reflections on the anxious learner in the classroom relying on self-reports and teachers’ discussions. A first step is based on describing possible signs of language anxiety, and what learners say about themselves. The subsequent point is devoted to the “caring” teacher’s role (s) in helping anxious learners overcome hindrances of anxiety in an EFL educational setting. It is important to note that most descriptions given stem from the Algerian university context.*

### **Keywords**

Language Anxiety, Signs of Anxiety, The Anxious Learner, The Caring Teacher, Algerian Context

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## **1. Introduction**

When anxiety is specific to the language learning context, it is referred to as foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al 1986). The ways it affects language learning has gained significant attention in the last three decades. There has been a fairly rapid growth in research on the negative effects of anxiety. Ongoing scholarly investigation on anxiety and its interference with language learning revealed that an understanding of its causes and how to reduce it will improve learners' performance.

At the instructional level, ideas proposed by leading figures like Maslow (1968 in Williams and Burden 1997), and Rogers (1969 cited in Williams and Burden 1997) have been influential in foreign language teaching methodologies. Particularly, the learning environment has to be significant in the sense that it minimizes anxiety and enhances personal growth (Williams and Burden 1997).

### **1.1 Scope of the Study**

Most discussions of language anxiety have centered on the difficulties caused by anxiety with respect to learners' proficiency in the target language. Measures of language achievement such as course grades and standardized proficiency tests were extensively used and revealed significant negative correlations between anxiety and performance (Horwitz et al 1986, Phillips 1992, Gkonou 2011). Research on signs of anxiety specific to language learning received less attention. An analysis of possible signs of anxiety and anxious learners' hidden voices can help in gaining more insights about teaching practices. Following this line of thought, this paper takes a step in that direction.

## **2. Anxiety in Language Learning**

The construct of anxiety as an affective variable in language learning has been defined with some variation in phrasing depending on aims set out by researchers. Perhaps, this is due to describing anxiety in terms of the behaviours associated with it. Brown (1987) for instance, states that anxiety is almost impossible to define in a simple sentence. Drawing from anxiety research in applied psychology, Scovel (1978:134) refers to anxiety as "*a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object*" measured by behavioural tests, physiological tests or self-reports of internal feelings and reactions. Horwitz et al (1986:125) regard it as "*the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system.*"

Anxiety can also be viewed as a response to a condition in which the external element is perceived as presenting a demand that threatens to exceed the student's capabilities and resources for meeting it (Williams 1991). Moreover, researchers like MacIntyre and Gardner (1994 b) define anxiety from a situation-specific perspective as "*the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning*" (1994: 284).

The relevance of students' anxiety as an educational problem has led some researchers to think of anxiety which affects language learning as a distinct type of anxiety. Almost a decade after Scovel's (1978) review, Horwitz et al (1986) made a similar comment in that "*second language research has neither adequately defined foreign language anxiety nor described its specific effects on language learning*" (1986:125). They have attributed the inconclusive results of previous research to the lack of reliable and valid measures of anxiety specific to language learning. As a result, Horwitz et al. (1986) attempted "*to fill this gap*" by identifying foreign language anxiety as a conceptually distinct variable in language learning and interpreting it with the context of existing theoretical and empirical work on specific anxiety reaction.

Foreign language students in university classes and at the Learning Skills Centre (LSC) at the University of Texas in Horwitz et al's (1986 ) study have suggested several problems caused by anxiety illustrating how those problems can interfere with language learning. Horwitz et al. (1986) cited listening and speaking as the main sources of anxiety. The following represent some of the problems described by students:

**1-Difficulty in speaking in class** has been the most frequently cited concern of the anxious foreign language students. Students reported that they would feel comfortable responding to a drill or delivering prepared speeches in their foreign language class but tended to "freeze" in a role-play situation. In a way, unprepared free speech was problematic for those anxious students.

**2-Difficulty in sound and linguistic structure discrimination** of the target language message. Students have difficulty in grasping the content of a target language message. Some of the students claimed that they had little or no idea of what the teacher was saying in extended language utterances.

**3-Testing situations** presented difficulties for some students. They reported that they had difficulties in concentrating and became forgetful. Most of time, they "know" a certain

grammar point but “forget” it during a test or an oral exercise when many grammar points must be remembered and coordinated simultaneously.

**4-Over studying as compensation** is a related aspect. Students who are overly concerned about their performance may become so anxious when they make errors, they may attempt to compensate by studying more. Those students are more frustrated when their increased efforts do not lead to improved grades.

**5-Avoidance of the situation** in an effort to alleviate anxiety . Anxious students exhibit “avoidance behaviour” such as missing class and postponing homework. In some cases, they skip class entirely.

**6-Certain beliefs** about language learning also contribute to the student’s tension and frustration in the classroom.

**7-Fear of making mistakes** that leads to silence instead of participation.

In presenting their theory, Horwitz et al. (1986) integrated three related anxieties to their conceptualisation of foreign language anxiety. Those interrelated processes include communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation.

Most SLA researchers regard foreign language anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety related to second language learning and use which is different from other types of anxiety (Horwitz et al 2010). To use MacIntyre and Gardner’s (1991) description of the way language anxiety can impair language learning and production, the anxious student may be characterised as:

*“An individual who perceives the second language as an uncomfortable experience, who withdraws from voluntary participation, who feels social pressures not to make mistakes, and who is less willing to try uncertain or novel linguistic forms.”*

(MacIntyre and Gardner 1991: 112)

Since language learning is a fairly intense cognitive activity, language anxiety can pose a significant problem for the language learner (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994a). Thus, it is important to consider the effects of anxiety as manifested in different behaviours in the language classroom. Although behaviours vary across cultures (Oxford 1999), the following part describes the most common ones.

### **3. Signs of Language Anxiety**

When an individual becomes anxious, negative self-related cognition begins and thoughts of failure, self-deprecation and avoidance begin to emerge (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994a). In an attempt to categorise major signs of language anxiety, Oxford (1999) offered a description of some behaviours which are likely signs of anxiety in the language classroom:

- General Avoidance: “Forgetting” the answer, showing carelessness, cutting class, coming late, arriving unprepared, low levels of verbal production, lack of volunteering in class, seeming inability to answer even the simplest questions.
- **Other Signs:** Such as over studying, perfectionism, social avoidance, conversational withdrawal, lack of eye contact, failing to interrupt when it would be natural to do so, excessive competitiveness, excessive self-criticism.

It must be remembered that those signs might reflect language anxiety depending on the culture. As such, Scarcella and Oxford (1992) and Oxford (1999) carefully noted that what might seem like anxious behaviours in one culture might be normal behaviours in another culture.

### **4. The Study**

#### **4.1 Research Questions**

The present study sought to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are the possible signs of language anxiety specific to Algerian learners?
- 2- How do learners and teachers perceive the notions of “the anxious learner” and “the Caring” teacher”?

#### **4.2 Participants**

The participants of the study were 14 students (two male and twelve female students) preparing an MA1 degree in Applied linguistics and TEFL at the English Department, University of Algiers 2. The sample was randomly selected as the participants were required to recall their EFL past learning experiences. In addition to that, two teachers volunteered to take part in answering the self- reports designed for teachers.

#### **4.3 Instruments**

Two self-report questionnaires (one for students and another for teachers) that included open-ended questions were used in the study during spring 2017. As highlighted by Dornyei (2007: 107) “*By permitting greater freedom of expression, open-format items can provide a far greater richness than fully qualitative data*”. The questions of the self -reports

were included to provide information on possible signs of language anxiety and participants' perceptions of anxious learners and caring teachers in the classroom. Moreover, the researcher's experience as a teacher at the English Department, University of Algiers 2 as well as discussions with teachers part of the departmental pedagogical meetings provided interesting data for the study.

## **5. Findings and Implications**

Answers to the research questions will be dealt with in different categories that would summarise the major results of the study:

### **5.1 Possible Signs of Language Anxiety**

Oxford (1999) suggested that language anxiety can be observed even without using an instrument. Interestingly, the subjects of the study referred to different signs of anxiety in class. It is assumed that some of the signs are reactions or behaviours adopted by learners whenever prone to language anxiety. By relying on content analysis (Dornyei 2007), results were grouped. The participants referred to the following possible signs of anxiety:

- Being silent in class so that other learners would not discover the weaknesses and difficulties encountered by the anxious learner;
- In EFL speaking, an over use of gestures or speaking fast;
- Making a lot of mistakes when producing the language either in speaking (Messadh 2010) or in writing. This is very recurrent especially when giving presentations or answers, participation in class, or providing explanations;
- The learner's voice is hardly audible to avoid public humiliation especially in pronunciation or speaking classes;
- Failing to understand what the teacher says and asking for repetition many times;
- Blushing and breathing with difficulty;
- Lack of eye contact mainly with the teacher.

### **5.2 The Anxious Learner**

Most of the subjects of the study pointed out that their greatest worry in class stemmed from fear of failure. They offered the following descriptions recalling their prior experiences of language anxiety in class:

**-Fear of incomprehension:** Anxiety arises when failing to understand the teacher or the classmates, or when the input is above the learner capacity.

- **Fear of the teacher:** Some participants expressed worry over the teacher's reaction in class. This could appear in lack of concentration because of a perceived threat. The subjects expressed fear of being embarrassed or laughed at in front of the class.

- **Pessimism about learning outcomes:** Anxious learners tend to have unrealistic goals as predicted in the literature (Horwitz et al 1986). Some of the subjects mentioned that they would feel anxious and avoid participation when classmates perform better. This would lead into limited interaction in class or low self-confidence for the anxious learner.

- **Fear of negative evaluation:** this concept was suggested by Horwitz et al (1986). In the present study, the subjects cited fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation. This is very problematic especially in speaking classes. Some learners in Messadh's (2010) study reported that they would feel very anxious in EFL speaking and loose concentration when they begin with a mistake. This is true about some of the participants of the study who said that fear of making mistakes would lead into hesitation and great anxiety.

### **5.3 The Caring Teacher**

In order to understand the notion of "the caring teacher", it is better to cite some of the instances given by the teachers and the students who participated in the study namely from the anxious direction. Some teachers would contribute into high anxiety levels. Their teaching practices were characterised by the following:

- They would ignore most of the learners in class especially in large classes.
- They would not make efforts in listening to every learner in class. Some teachers favour a group of learners at the expense of others and this could generate low self – esteem for the anxious learner.
- They embarrass learners namely the less proficient ones whenever they make mistakes by excessive error correction in speaking or by showing their writing copies in front of everybody in a writing class.
- They would rarely smile to learners.

Because a low-stress learning environment is believed to facilitate learning, encouraging a relaxed atmosphere can alleviate anxiety (Horwitz et al.1986). Caring teachers can minimise language anxiety. Thus, it might be of value to consider a number of parameters suggested by Crookall and Oxford (1991) about language learning anxiety to make attempts in reducing its negative impact:

### **-Seating in the Language Class:**

The classroom atmosphere is influenced by the physical setting of the class. In classrooms where chairs are bolted to the floor, group work and moving can be difficult to achieve especially in large classes (Crookall and Oxford 1991). Therefore, it is suggested that students should sit in a semi-circle to encourage classroom interaction. Having the teacher as the main focus is not always helpful for the anxious learner.

As a teacher of speaking and writing at the English Department, I noticed that the sessions organized in a semi-circle were more beneficial for students. The seating of the students was helpful in gaining more comprehension, peer support, and eye contact. When the student's main focus is the instructor not everyone can necessarily be attentive to the answers of his or her fellow peers. In this respect, having a comfortable physical setting seems crucial in involving every individual in classroom activities.

### **- Changing Classroom Patterns:**

EFL teachers can improve the classroom climate through the use of pair work, small group work and simulations mainly in speaking and writing classes. Instead of the typical format in which communication occurs mainly with the teacher who corrects the mistakes of the embarrassed students' errors in front of the class, teachers may change this pattern into student-to-student communication. The emphasis of the teacher should be on students' ability in conveying meaning rather than underscoring mistakes (Crookall and Oxford 1991). Crookall and Oxford (1991) point out:

*"As the classroom structure and communication patterns change, we can expect debilitating anxiety to lower and students to begin to relax. Learners then usually become more concerned with trying to communicate their viewpoint than with avoiding public humiliation, saving face, or impressing the teacher with the ability to parrot "correct" answers".*

(Crookall and Oxford 1991: 142)

However, some classroom procedures may actually be quite the contrary for students who are near silent listening and speaking only when spoken to. In fact, changing the classroom patterns may sometimes increase anxiety in some students (Crookall and Oxford 1991). It is suggested that with new patterns of communication in the classroom, students are likely to relax with time.



### **-The Role of the Teacher:**

The findings of the present study in many instances showed that instructors had played a significant role in the amount of anxiety students experienced in language classes. The informal discussions with EFL teachers at the English Department revealed that in many cases, such as assisting students with necessary vocabulary, instructors had alleviated both speaking and writing anxieties. Conversely, some other EFL instructors had increased students' tension by forcing them to participate or through overt correction of mistakes. Indeed, the teacher's rapport with the students is vital in decreasing anxiety. Student will appreciate and learn more from teachers who are able to identify students experiencing anxiety and take proper measures to help them overcome that anxiety. In more concrete terms, we may cite Aida's (1994) recommendation when she states that:

*"Being responsive to the students' needs, language teachers can make it possible for anxious students to maximize their language learning by building a nonthreatening and positive learning environment".*

(Aida 1994: 164)

Teachers may have a vital role in helping anxious learners by considering some of the suggestions related to EFL instruction:

1. Students' fears of public embarrassment must be taken seriously when designing activities for speaking and writing classes especially with beginners. Teachers could prepare their students for the possibility of meeting difficulties and possible anxiety in learning the foreign language (Aida 1994).
2. Discussing directly the issue of language anxiety with students reassures the anxious students that they are not alone in their affective reactions and that those feelings are normal and anticipated by the teacher (Foss and Reitzel 1988, Phillips 1992). In other words, knowing that anxiety and difficulties are possible, learning the foreign language can be reassuring for anxious students.
3. Establishing good relations with students is crucial in creating a supportive learning atmosphere in the classroom (Tsui 1996). Involving students in discussions about their difficulties and problems in learning the foreign language can create trust between students and the teacher. McCoy (1979) described such discussions as "Cognitive Restructuring" in which students speak about their feelings and rationalize their anxieties about language learning. However, such practice is somewhat beyond reach

especially in large classes. Not all students are willing to verbalize their fears and difficulties in front of the class. Revealing such concerns can be viewed a sign of incompetence in the eyes of the anxious learners. In my speaking and writing classes, I found that students were less likely to speak about their anxieties. Instead, discussing such concerns in a small group size was more helpful for many language learners. In addition to that, teachers are advised to care about the anxious language learner by smiling, providing excessive praise to boost self-confidence and self-esteem. Such practice -if ever implemented in class- is likely to change a lot for the anxious learner.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to provide some tentative reflections on language anxiety specifically on the part of the anxious learner and the caring teacher. The primary aim has centred on verbalising the hidden voices in the EFL classroom. Though the sample of the study was limited, it helped to shed some light on this area of enquiry. Findings regarding signs of anxiety revealed that over-use of gestures, speaking fast, or speaking in a very low voice when participating or interacting in class are peculiar to the Algerian context. This might stem from the over reliance on large classes at university level. Another issue addressed in this paper is the way learners perceive their worries and fears in class. They essentially referred to major sources of language anxiety such as fear of incomprehension, fear of the teacher, pessimism about learning outcomes, and fear of negative evaluation. The role of the teacher especially when caring about the anxious learner appeared to be of paramount importance. Finally, the present paper ended up with some pedagogical suggestions that might be useful in minimising language anxiety in an EFL classroom setting.

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