APRENDIZAJES PLURILINGÜES Y LITERARIOS. NUEVOS ENFOQUES DIDÁCTICOS

APRENETATGES PLURILINGÜES I LITERARIS. NOUS ENFOCAMENTS DIDÀCTICS

Antonio Díez Mediavilla
Vicent Brotons Rico
Dari Escandell Maestre
José Rovira Collado (eds.)
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PUBLICACIONS DE LA UNIVERSITAT D’ALACANT
THE TEACHER AS A SOURCE OF ANXIETY FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Patricia Arnaiz-Castro
patricia.arnaiz@ulpgc.es
Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

Jessica Mª Pérez-Luzardo Díaz
jessica.perezluzardo@ulpgc.es
Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

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ABSTRACT: Students experience anxiety when learning a foreign language and this anxiety can be caused by a wide variety of factors. As part of a wider research project into the role of students’ perceptions in the language-learning process, this study explores the perceptions of three groups of university students on the verbal and nonverbal behaviour of teachers in class and how this affects their feelings of anxiety. Furthermore, it examines the degree of responsibility these learners attribute to their teacher for a particular anxiety episode. A qualitative/quantitative design was used. Findings indicated that teacher-related anxiety was most often associated with classroom management techniques, particularly with teachers’ ways of “inviting” students to speak and with the pace adopted by the teacher in the lesson. The carefully elaborated reports of many of the participants in the study revealed the importance of teachers’ professional and emotional skills. Other findings showed, however, that learners placed a higher degree of responsibility for their anxiety on themselves than on the teacher. On the basis of these results, the study suggests some measures that can be followed in the classroom to reduce anxiety levels. Such measures are expected to yield positive results in the performance of the learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

The English language is increasingly regarded as a «basic educational skill to be developed from primary level alongside literacy and numeracy» (DORNYEI & USHIODA: 2011, 72), and as a «key literacy feature worldwide» (DALTON-PUFFER: 2011, 183). Since the mid-nineties, the Council of Europe and the European Commission have centred their attention on, and dedicated their efforts to, raising awareness about the importance of learning foreign languages. In 1995, in the White Paper entitled Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society, the European Commission established that everyone should be able to communicate in two European languages in addition to their mother tongue. Therefore, nowadays in Spain nobody would doubt the need for a good mastery of English and for achieving it within the education system. However, learners of English often experience anxiety while learning to speak English, and that anxiety has been reported to hinder their achievements (ARNAIZ & GUILLÉN: 2013; GARDNER & MACINTYRE: 1993; HEWITT & STEPHENSON: 2012; HORWITZ, HORWITZ & COPE: 1986; WOODROW: 2006). In fact, «the potential of anxiety to interfere with learning and performance is one of the most accepted phenomena in psychology and education» (HORWITZ: 2000).
Horwitz et al. (1986) described foreign language anxiety as «a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process» (p. 128). Furthermore, they explained that foreign language anxiety is a psychological construct that relates to communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Communication apprehension is a condition that makes people fearful of communicating with others. Test anxiety is a psychological condition that causes uneasiness before, during or after a test; learners who experience this anxiety usually feel uncomfortable in the foreign language class since tests of all types are quite frequent. Oral tests usually cause both test and communication anxiety in these students. Fear of negative evaluation is related not only with the negative feedback students may receive from their teachers but also from peers; as a consequence, learners who feel apprehension about others’ negative evaluation will find it hard to participate actively in the foreign language classroom.

Since the teaching and learning process in the classroom is led by the teacher, it is necessary to consider how teachers can play a significant role in students' foreign language anxiety, taking as a reference the dimensions of FL anxiety identified by Horwitz et al. (1986). Communication apprehension may appear if a teacher chooses classroom activities that require students to speak the target language in front of others without time for planning. The second dimension, test anxiety or apprehension about academic evaluation, is likely to emerge in any teacher-learner interaction. On the one hand, the teacher most often plans lessons in a way that learners' performance can be continuously assessed; on the other hand, students often perceive any encounter with their teacher as a test. Fear of negative evaluation can also be closely connected with teachers’ classroom behaviour. Certain correction methods used by teachers may trigger students’ anxiety, like interrupting students to correct their errors, which may lead to a loss of concentration.

However, the role a teacher plays in the foreign language-learning process is determined more by students’ perceptions than by their actual behaviour and techniques, as demonstrated in several studies conducted in a wide variety of settings (see e.g. BROWN: 2009; OHATA: 2005; WILLIAMS ET AL.: 2004; VON WORDE: 2003).

As a fundamental variable in the language-learning process, anxiety has been investigated from various perspectives and with different students’ profiles. However, there still remains a wide variety of aspects that require research attention, and learners’ perception of their teachers as anxiety-generating agents is one of them.

2. PRESENT STUDY

This study is part of a series of studies that attempt to close a gap in the literature on foreign language learning by providing empirical evidence on learners’ anxiety from an underexplored context. It follows Hewitt and Stephenson’s (2012, 170) recommendation about the need to continue undertaking research on language anxiety issues. To this end, this study investigates students’ perceptions of their teachers as anxiety-generating agents in the context of university English classes in Spain.

No research has been found in the literature analyzing the different teacher-related issues that cause anxiety to Spanish university learners of English or to what extent learners attribute the responsibility for their classroom anxiety to the teacher. Only the study by Williams and Andrade (2008), carried out with Japanese university students of English, directed its attention to similar aspects and employed comparable analyses. Other studies have focused on learners’ own experience with anxiety but have addressed it from different perspectives and with varied...
decisive for an understanding of anxiety and its role in foreign language learning, the results of
previous studies are by no means applicable to the setting of our investigation; it is therefore
necessary to carry out this type of research in the context we describe in this paper. As Weseley
(2012, 105) puts forward, we need to be able to draw on different types of evidence if our aim
is to further knowledge about language learners and the language-learning process. Since the
diversity of learner characteristics, beliefs and perceptions is as broad as the contexts they belong
to, under no circumstances can it be considered that the situations of anxiety and perceptions
detected in a certain group of students are representative of students with other profiles (Liu: 2006; Rifkin: 2000). We hope that the results of this study and the resulting suggestions may
provide researchers with a new perspective on Spanish university learners’ beliefs about learning
English as a foreign language and, particularly, about the role of the teacher.

The following research questions guided this study:
1. To what extent are teachers present in the descriptions of anxiety episodes given by
   students?
2. Who do students think was/were responsible for that anxiety episode?

3. PARTICIPANTS

Data for the study were collected from 120 female students (55.5%) and 96 males (44.5%) who
ranged in age from 18 to 39 (M = 20.39; SD = 3.69), all of whom provided written informed
consent. There were 156 students from the Teacher Training Faculty, 30 from the Translation and
Interpreting Faculty and 30 from the Computer Science Faculty. All the participants started learning
English at school when they were six years old. Their language levels in English ranged from B1 to
C1: 117 were B1-level students, 87 were B2-level and the rest, 12, C1-level. English class groups
at university are organized according to these levels, and established following The Common
European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)
(2001), a guideline used to describe foreign language learners’ achievements across Europe.¹

4. INSTRUMENT

In this study, an adapted version of the questionnaire designed by Williams and Andrade (2008)
was used. The questionnaire comprised four questions that required both free and structured
responses. For the purposes of the research presented here, only the responses to two of the
questions were examined. The first was an open-ended question about a specific situation that
had provoked anxiety in students. In the second question, students had to indicate on a four-
point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (a lot), the extent to which they perceived four
agents to be responsible for the particular anxiety situation previously described. A background
questionnaire, including some demographic information, was also used in this study.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

In order to analyze the two research questions selected, different analyses were conducted. A
qualitative analysis was performed to assess the sources of anxiety for university students during
class time. Individual participants’ responses were analyzed by means of a grounded theory

¹ The 2008 study by Martínez Baztán addressed The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages
(ACTFL) Guidelines. Thus, B1 would correspond to Intermediate Mid and Intermediate High, B2 would correspond
to Intermediate High and Advanced Low, and C1 to Advanced Mid and Advanced High.
approach, allowing categories to emerge from the data. After individual participants’ responses were read, common answers were grouped together to create taxonomies. We tried as far as possible to interpret the meanings that the respondents intended. The two researchers reviewed the emerging categories independently and labels were assigned only when agreement had been reached. Subsequently, participants’ written responses were tallied to calculate frequency of responses.

Descriptive statistics were calculated to answer the second research question about responsibility attributions for anxiety feelings in the previously described situations. Afterwards, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was performed to determine if there were any significant differences in the distribution of responsibility attributions caused by gender.

6. RESULTS

Data were analyzed and reported by research questions:

Research Question 1: To what extent are teachers present in the descriptions of anxiety episodes given by students?

The qualitative analysis corresponding to the open-ended responses in which students described over 200 situations that provoked anxiety revealed seven main thematic affinities related to anxiety, and one of them was related to the teacher. It was observed that 23.1% of these comments referred to the teacher. Some students reported anxiety when the teacher used random selection:

- [159] He sentido ansiedad cuando me han obligado a hablar en inglés delante de toda la clase [I have felt anxious when forced to speak in English in front of the whole group].

- [230] Cuando me apuntan con el dedo a la hora de preguntar, pues me recuerda a mis tiempos de escuela primaria, en la que el castigo era ponerme en ridículo ante mis compañeros [When the teacher points at with his/her finger when asking questions, this brings back memories of my primary school times, when the punishment consisted of making me look foolish in front of my classmates].

- [236] Una pregunta directa en inglés en la que me sentí presionado para contestar [A straight question in English that I felt pressured to answer].

Lack of support on the part of the teacher also appears to be a crucial factor, as described in the following comment:

- [235] Cuando no me siento apoyada, alentada o animada por parte del profesorado [When I don’t feel supported, encouraged or stimulated by the teacher].

Some students mentioned the teacher’s unfortunate decision of giving students the chance to correct their peers:

- [217] Cuando mi profesor de inglés cogió mi redacción y puso todos mis fallos en la pizarra para que mis compañeros me corrigieran [When my English teacher corrected my composition and wrote all my mistakes on the blackboard for my classmates to correct].

The teachers’ mood also affects students, as manifested in the following statement:

- [138] Pues que la profesora chilló durante mucho tiempo y sólo se dedicaba a hablar en inglés y a mirar mal [Well, the teacher shouted for a long time and limited herself to speaking in English and looking at us in a bad way].

In addition, the very act of speaking English is also presented as anxiety-triggering for the learner.

Other issues that students addressed were related to teachers’ explanation abilities:
Lastly, some students identified the very presence of the teacher as anxiety-provoking:

Research Question 2: Who do students think was/were responsible for that anxiety episode?

Participants give themselves the highest score (M = 2.85, SD= 1.13). The non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test found significant male-female differences on responsibility attribution (z = 2.07, p = .039). Women (M = 3.03, SD = 0.97) consider themselves responsible for the anxiety situation described to a greater extent than men (M = 2.64, SD = 1.28). The second responsible agent for students’ anxiety event described is the teacher (M = 1.97, SD= 1.13), and here no differences (z = -1.41, p = .157) were observed between men (M = 1.92, SD = 1.13) and women (M = 2.00, SD = 0.99).

7. Discussion

The goal of this study was to address gaps in the literature on foreign language anxiety in the Spanish university context by examining, in the first place, those situations related to the teacher that make students feel more anxious; secondly, to find out the degree of responsibility for their anxiety they attributed to the teacher.

A series of relevant outcomes resulted from this study. In many cases, it was being forced to speak that students considered most anxiety-generating. These results corroborate those obtained by Burden (2004) in his analysis of 289 questionnaires corresponding to first-year students during English conversation classes at a university in Western Japan, and by Ewald (2007) in his research with 21 advanced students of Spanish. Williams and Andrade (2008) have suggested two possible solutions to this problem. One would be to give prompts to produce a successful response; another technique would be to teach learners a variety of utterances such as “I don’t know the answer to your question, maybe one of my classmates can help me”. These conversational strategies would perhaps help students feel a bit more in control of the conversation and would reduce their anxiety levels. On the other hand, perhaps a predictable order would provoke less anxiety in students.

Another common source of anxiety revolved around the way teachers correct students’ mistakes; for some it is intimidating to receive that type of feedback in front of the whole class. One possible approach to helping learners solve this problem would be to introduce whole-group discussions about their feelings and their expectations. It is the teachers’ task to help students understand that the class is not only a place for “demonstrating knowledge and skill, but also for gaining it” (GREGERSEN & HORWITZ: 2002, 570), and therefore sharing mistake correction should be part of the language-learning session. The acceptance of mistakes by both the teacher and learners should be a key principle in the foreign language-learning process. Learners should be continuously reassured that although they may be nervous, these feelings should not make them feel unhappy about their learning. Some students also pointed to the mood of the teacher as a source of anxiety.

Some studies have suggested that students’ perceptions of teachers’ behaviour are strongly related to their achievement. For instance, in the study by Hasan (2013), undertaken with secondary school English learners in Indonesia, students who had a positive perception of their teachers experienced lower anxiety levels and better performances. Future research in a setting...
similar to the one presented in the current study should measure the relationship between students’ perceptions of their teachers as anxiety-triggering agents and their achievements. As indicated by Williams, Burden and Al-Baharna (2001), students’ perceptions are inevitably context-specific.

Concerning responsibility issues, students do attribute some of the responsibility for their anxiety to their teachers, although to a lesser extent than to themselves. Obviously, whether or not the teachers were actually the cause of the anxiety is unknown but teachers should not disregard the fact that the students believe it to be so. In this respect, we suggest teachers keep in mind the situations that most commonly provoke anxiety and consider ways they might modify their lesson plans and teaching techniques if anxiety appears to be a problem in their classes. These results point to a notable difference between our study and the study carried out by Williams and Andrade (2008). In their case, the highest score was given to the teacher while the students ranked second.

One of the goals of foreign language anxiety research is to find strategies for reducing anxiety. Researchers have provided a long list of practical suggestions for coping with foreign language anxiety (see Horwitz, Tallon & Luo: 2010 for a comprehensive review); however, these suggestions have not been empirically tested. It is of utmost importance that future research be designed to test these suggestions, which would help language teachers and learners deal with this problem to a greater extent.

The findings of this study are important for education authorities and teachers. Education authorities might consider organizing workshops to raise awareness of this important aspect. For teachers, this finding should stimulate efforts to be especially attentive to students’ perceptions and to the way these perceptions exert influence on their feelings of anxiety. It is suggested that teachers try to identify the signals of students’ anxiety and adapt certain classroom procedures to at least reduce foreign language anxiety. The big problem of foreign language anxiety is that its effect goes beyond the classroom doors. A person who has studied a foreign language throughout his/her academic life and experiences high or medium anxiety levels may feel deterred from pursuing their language study and may never speak that language afterwards. It is for this reason that research should continue to invest effort and time in revealing data about this issue, covering varied settings and profiles.

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