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The Teacher's Perspectives on Students' Language Anxiety

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This paper is aimed at the investigation of the teacher's perspectives on students' language anxiety. The teachers who participated in this study include six Asian ESL teachers from four different countries: Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China. The methodology employed by this case study, helped to determine teachers' perspectives on students' language anxiety. This study, which was conducted by means of in-depth interviews with six experienced language teachers, offered some alternative insights on language anxiety from a different perspective. The findings indicate that the participants' views on language anxiety management seem to be fairly consistent with their own beliefs about teaching and their own assumptions about the role of the teacher.

**[language anxiety/teachers' beliefs/case study,
언어불안/교사신념/사례연구]**

I. INTRODUCTION

Students feel different kinds of anxiety which have been considered to have detrimental effects on their language performance and their language learning process. Because student anxiety is a complex phenomenon that involves many independent variables affecting anxiety, it needs to be addressed from a wide range of perspectives and approaches.

Many research studies have dealt with language anxiety from the students'

perspective; however, few studies have investigated anxiety from the teacher's viewpoints. For instance, the teacher is not likely to notice the students' anxiety because it is not necessarily revealed in their behaviors in the classroom. As a result, the teacher assesses students' anxiety incorrectly and it leads to some gaps between the teacher's perspectives on student anxiety and the students' actual psychological needs. In other words, this perceptual gap between the two may bring about further anxiety among students. This kind of gap deepens students' anxiety which gives stress to students and may lower their motivation.

In this study, I would like to examine if there are any gaps between the teacher's and the students' viewpoints on language anxiety as I compare the characteristics of student anxiety with those of teacher's perspectives on language anxiety.

The focus of this study is on identifying the teacher's beliefs about anxiety and the impact of their beliefs upon students' language learning process. It examines the discrepancies, if any, between students' and teachers' beliefs about anxiety.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Definitions of Anxiety

Anxiety can be defined as "a state of apprehension, a vague fear" (Scovel 1978, p. 134), which entails many other psychological states such as the feeling of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, or worry. People can experience two kinds of anxiety at various psychological levels. At the deepest level, anxiety is portrayed as a permanent trait because some people have personalities that make them feel anxious about a lot of things. They are born with such enormous anxieties in them whether they like it or not, or whether they want to feel it or not. This anxiety is too deep and quite unchangeable. At a situational level, people experience anxiety as they respond to certain situations or stimuli (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991).

Horwitz (1986) identifies three elements of language anxiety: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. These kinds of language anxiety are known to be related to various types of language activities in classroom.

1) Communication Apprehension

It is a type of shyness influenced by fear or anxiety about communicating with

people. This apprehension is referred to as the difficulty students have in speaking up in group or in public. This anxiety deters students from listening to spoken messages clearly. Because students in the classrooms are constantly monitored by their peers and teacher, students seem to have a great amount of anxiety in communicating with others in the target language (Horwitz, 1986).

2) Fear of Negative Evaluation

Watson and Friend (1969) define this fear as "apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectations that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (pp. 488-51). This apprehension is not limited to only test-taking situations. It can be extended into any social, evaluative context such as speaking for a job interview or speaking in a wide range of social meetings. Another example is that students feel anxious about being evaluated by their teacher as well as their peers. Due to the fear of negative evaluation, students are reluctant to speak in the classroom.

3) Test Anxiety

This anxiety stems from students' fear of failure in their performance on the test. A lot of students feel a certain amount of anxiety before, during and after taking tests because they feel pressured to think, remember, and coordinate a large amount of knowledge at the same time during the test. They are likely to put down the wrong answer due to tension or nervousness, even if they know the correct answer. Too much anxiety about tests can have a negative impact on students' ability to think and remember.

2. Potential Sources of Language Anxiety

It is worthwhile to examine potential sources of language anxiety in that they address crucial issues that have impact upon forming students' language anxiety. Young (1991) provides six potential sources of language anxiety: personal and interpersonal anxiety, learner beliefs about language learning, instructor beliefs about language teaching, instructor-learner actions, classroom procedures, and language testing.

1) Personal and Interpersonal Anxieties

Many research studies deal with personal and interpersonal issues which have been examined along with other social and psychological constructs such as competitiveness, self-esteem, group identity, or social discourse. Bailey (1983) examined the relationship between the learners' competitiveness and self-esteem as a driving force and argued that competitive nature of L2 learning may bring about anxiety when learners compare themselves to others or to the positive face. Krashen (1992) implies that learners' degree of self-esteem determines the level of anxiety. For instance, if learners who have low self-esteem tend to be anxious about what and how their peers or friends think with fear of their negative responses or evaluation. Price (1991) and Hembree (1998) state that learners' perception of their level of language proficiency plays a role in affecting their anxiety. For example, learners have a stronger anxiety if they think their language proficiency is lower than that of others in class. In other words, if learners compare their language performance with others, it can lead to anxiety. Leary (1982) refers to this anxiety as "social anxiety" (1982). Leary (1982) defines social anxiety as "a type of anxiety that arises from the prospect or presence of interpersonal evaluation in real or imagined social settings" (p. 102). Krashen (1985) points out the potential influence of social anxiety on L2 learning with his hypothesis "Affective Filter Hypotheses" (1985). He argues that the affective filter can be lowered when a learner regards himself or herself as a member of particular target language group such as a member of the Spanish, Japanese "club" (p. 16). In the similar vein, Terrell (as cited in Young, 1992) supports Krashen's "group membership" theory illustrating the social aspects of child L1 acquisition. He proposes that "children acquire their first language and a second language in order to identify and be a member of the group that speaks that language" (p. 27). To sum up, Krashen and Terrell view that language anxiety has a correlation with the learner's experience of "target language group identification"

Another type of socio-psychological construct identified by Radin (1988) is "existential anxiety." She defines existential anxiety as a more profound sort of anxiety which is inherent to the language learning process as it "touches the core of one's self-identity, one's self image" (p. 35). This anxiety can occur because learners feel like losing their identity as they learn another language.

Other types of psychological phenomena that may arise in the context of L2 learning include Shumann's concept of "social discourse" (1978), Clarke's theory of

"clash of consciousness" (1976), and Guiora's "language ego" (1972). These psychological phenomena accompanied by low self-esteem and competitiveness, can be the root of learners' language anxiety in their language performance.

2) Learner Belief about Language Learning

Young (1991) argues that learner beliefs about language learning are one of the important components that contributes to increasing language anxiety in learners. The finding of Gynan's (1989) study shows that some learners believe that pronunciation is the most crucial skill of L2 learning, while others believe that other aspects of language learning such as vocabulary, communication, or translation are more important than pronunciation.

Horwitz (1998) conducted a similar study on learner beliefs and concluded that some of learner beliefs are derived from the learner's unrealistic and erroneous conceptions about language learning. He found that some learners were extremely critical and conscious about the accuracy of their speech in comparison to native-like accent or pronunciation. Another finding is that some learners believed that only two years of language learning is long enough to achieve a native-like language fluency. Some learners expressed their belief that language learning is learning how to translate. Some learners believed that limited language learners who are gifted for language learning can succeed. These unrealistic beliefs that learners possess can bring about anxiety, especially when their beliefs are not congruent with reality they face. When they encounter this kind of clash, anxiety might be increased. For instance, if language beginners believe that pronunciation is the most significant aspect of L2 learning, they will have a sense of frustration to realize that achieving native-like pronunciation is difficult even after a long period of time and a great deal of practice. Likewise, learner beliefs serve as a dominant role in shaping language anxiety in learners.

3) Teacher Beliefs about Language Teaching

Teacher beliefs about language teaching can contribute to induce, increase, or reduce language anxiety in L2 learners. The teacher's beliefs on the role of language teachers are not necessarily consistent with the students' needs or expectations toward the teacher. For example, when a teacher believes that his/her role in class is to constantly correct students' errors, some of the students are likely

to become very anxious about their language performance, especially in class. This anxiety may prevent students from speaking up and actively participating in class activities.

4) Teacher-Learner Interactions and Classroom Procedures

Even though a lot of language learners understand that error correction to certain extent is needed (Horwitz, 1988; Koch & Terrell, 1991), the ways that errors are corrected are considered to provoke anxiety. The findings of these studies, examining anxiety in relation to teacher-learner interaction reveal that learners are more concerned about how(when, what, where, or how often) their errors are corrected rather than whether error correction should be done in class. Furthermore, some of the activities in the classroom, such as oral presentations or oral skits in front of the class are regarded as potential sources of anxiety (Young, 1990). She reported that sixty eight percent of her subjects expressed uncomfortable feelings in speaking in front of the class.

One of the approaches toward better understanding learner anxiety and its effect on the L2 learning is to investigate the teacher's beliefs on anxiety. Although a number of studies have focused on language anxiety from the learner perspective (Bailey, 1983; Koch & Terrell, 1991; Price, 1991; Young, 1991), the teacher's perspective on the role of anxiety in L2 learning has not been examined thoroughly as a potential source of student anxiety.

III. METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

The participants of the present study were six experienced ESL teachers who were enrolled in an MA TESOL program at Western Penn University. They were Asian English teachers from four different countries: Korea, China, Japan, and Taiwan. All of my participants exhibited different teaching backgrounds regarding the length of teaching, the situation in which they taught English, or levels of students they taught. I describe the brief profile of the participants in the study. In the table below, the participants' names have been changed to pseudonyms.

TABLE 1
A Brief Profile of the Participants

Name	Country	Years of Teaching Experience	The Levels of Students	The Characteristics of Students
HyeYoung	Korea	3 years at Junior-high School	Advanced	Competitive with Each Other in Class
Elaine	Taiwan	10 years at the senior-high school level	Advanced	Focus on Preparing for their College Entrance Exams
Fred	China	11 years at a high-school and college	High Intermediate	Serious about Studying English to Get a Job After School
Susie	Taiwan	10 years at the junior-high school	Intermediate	Busy Preparing for Their College Entrance Exams
Masato	Japan	4 years at college	Advanced	Highly Motivated to Learn English
TaeWook	Korea	3 and a half years at language Institute	High Intermediate	Competitive with Each Other

Six interview questions I asked my participants are as follows:

- 1) What's your belief on learner anxiety in L2 learning? What kind of role do you think anxiety plays in L2 learning?
- 2) Can you attribute a positive aspect to anxiety?
- 3) Do language learners experience an equal amount of anxiety in all four skill areas?
- 4) How do you see anxiety reflected in your students?
- 5) What kind of strategies do you use to reduce learner anxiety in class?
- 6) How are those strategies related to your belief of teaching?

IV. FINDINGS

1. What's Your Belief on Learner Anxiety in L2 Learning?

All of the participants agreed on the conception that anxiety plays a crucial role

in L2 learning. It seems that this general belief on anxiety reflects their concern about the negative influence of anxiety upon their learners' L2 performance in class and their further L2 learning process. TaeWook expressed his concern about learner anxiety. "When students feel anxiety about participating in classroom activities, they cannot perform to their full capacity, which eventually leads to lower their intrinsic motivation to learn more."

Also, Elaine, Susie and Masato shared the same belief on learner anxiety, to the effect that anxious feelings associated with the student's L2 performance can have a major impact on their subsequent L2 learning process as those feelings may affect the amount of types of input that the student can access to. Elaine clearly indicated this negative aspect of anxiety, stating, "If students become emotionally disturbed or imbalanced, they will not tap their potential ability to the fullest level, and their perception of failure to do so might make them more anxious about their ability and lead to lower their self-esteem." Other beliefs expressed by Elaine, Susie and Masato, however, seemed to look more at the positive aspect of learner anxiety, reflecting their own experience as a L2 learner. Elaine mentioned "anxiety can be either helpful or devastating, depending on the individual learner. But in general, if they don't feel any pressure or anxiety, they would not do anything after all." Susie also suggested that anxiety may or may not influence the learner's L2 learning but it all depends on many different factors, such as the level of anxiety, personality of the learner, cultural background and others.

2. Can You Attribute a Positive Aspect to Anxiety?

In relation to the question 1, all of my participants responded to this question in a quite extensive manner by offering intriguing and illustrative examples. Although all of them agreed that anxiety has a positive aspect in itself, their views on how facilitating or debilitating it can be for the student's L2 learning seemed to differ from one participant or another.

They illustrated several influential factors that might affect the possibility of whether student anxiety can become facilitative or debilitating, such as the level of anxiety, the student's different personality, task difficulty, the students' perceived level of English proficiency, cultural differences and so on. Some of the participants, Elaine, Susie, and Masato expressed their inability, sometimes, to assess all these individual differences, by stating, "We all know that different students feel anxious for different reasons, but we can not simply tell whether their anxiety is facilitating

or debilitating", while others maintained that "Facilitative anxiety can be created by the teacher's efforts to meet the needs or interests of the students."

3. Do Language Learners Experience an Equal Amount of Anxiety in All Four Areas?

All of my participants seemed to share the same perspective on this question, in this sense that the level of anxiety for each language skill (listening, writing, reading, and speaking) can vary, depending on the individual student differences, such as their personality traits, their levels of proficiency, and their learning style preferences.

For instance, they said that some students who would perceive themselves as shy, quiet people and prefer an independent learning style might think of speaking tasks in class as the most stressful of all the other skill areas, while others whose disposition is an out-going and self-expressive type may prefer speaking tasks to the other learning tasks which require them to work by themselves. Thus, many of the participants said that they found it quite difficult or sometimes impossible to detect which skills areas are more anxious-provoking than the others, because of those variable factors hidden inside each individual student.

Despite the common difficulty expressed by all the participants in assessing or detecting student anxiety as to which skill areas can be more stressful than the others, however, they all agreed that there would be one key factor that influence student anxiety the most regardless of different skill areas, that is, the involvement of evaluation. Susie said in a quite assuring manner that "If some kind of evaluation, either from the teacher or other students, is involved, students may feel anxiety in all the skill areas."

4. How Do Teachers See Anxiety Manifested in Their Students?

Some of the physical or psychological symptoms they said they noticed in their students as a sign of their anxious feelings were: playing with their hair, avoiding eye-contact with the teacher, sweating palms, blushed faces, nervous facial expressions, trembling, shaky body movements and so forth. In general, however, many of the participants said that they would not be able to notice the real anxious feelings of their students unless their anxiety was manifested as obvious physical symptoms as in these behaviors above. HyeYoung, Elaine, and Susie expressed

their honest attitude toward student anxiety, "I always try to be sensitive to their anxious feelings in class, but I can not always tell whether they are nervous or not just by their physical behaviors."

5. What Kind of Strategies Do You Use to Reduce Student Anxiety in Class?

All of my participants illustrated various kinds of strategies they employed or they would use to reduce student anxiety in the classroom. Those are expressed in the following two points: 1) creating a comfortable classroom environment and 2) instructional procedures.

1) Creating a Comfortable Classroom Environment

Teachers use a lot of fun activities so that students can relax, such as games or songs, and letting students laugh by telling jokes/playing some background music.

2) Instructional Procedures

Teachers use more display questions (open-ended) than of referential questions and encourage group works. Also they set different expectations for different students (asking different questions according to their proficiency levels) and use recasting for error-correction rather than direct error-correction.

6. How are Those Strategies Related to Your Beliefs about Teaching?

As is apparent from those techniques presented above, many of the participants seemed to share the same underlying assumption about teaching, that "the classroom should be student-centered rather than teacher-centered" or that "that teacher should provide a comfortable learning environment for the students to maximize their learning potential." Thus, in general, they all agreed that their ways of dealing with student anxiety are closely related to their own teaching philosophy as a reflection of their images of good teachers. However, some differences were also found in terms of the role of the teacher they assumed or wanted to assume in the classroom. Some said that "the role of the teacher should be that of counselor, care taker, facilitator, or friend", while others maintained that "the teacher should

keep the stance of authority even if they could assume the role of facilitator."

V. DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

1. Teachers' Perspectives on Their Roles in Attributing a Positive Aspect to Anxiety

Descriptions of the six experienced teachers' perspectives on language anxiety and its possible effects on L2 learning and acquisition seem to corroborate the findings by previous research on language anxiety from the students' perspectives. However, there were also some differences or discrepancies discovered between the teachers' and students' perceptions on the role of anxiety in the classroom L2 learning contexts.

For instance, commonly cited psychological constructs in defining language anxiety, such as test anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation, were discussed by many of my participants as potential sources of student anxiety in the classroom. These perceptions, therefore, point out that the teachers can recognize that language classroom could become a highly anxiety-provoking environment for students. In addition, mostly negative responses attained by many of the participants as to the possible effects of anxiety on L2 learning also seem to support the current research that claims that language learning anxiety is to be rated significantly higher than other class anxieties such as math and English class anxieties (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

At the same time, however, many of the experienced teachers maintained that some of the language anxiety could have a positive or facilitating effects on L2 learning and acquisition, which is also in line with the theoretical contention proposed by many anxiety researchers that "some edge" is necessary in language learning" (Omaggio, 1986). According to Terrell and Rardin (as cited in Young, 1992), a positive aspect of anxiety can be interpreted as a state of "attentiveness" or "alertness" so that the learner's attention to the needed input can be facilitated.

Although these corroborative views to the existing anxiety research are expressed by all the participants, there are some theoretical perspectives that they did not refer to in the interviews. For example, a more profound type of anxiety called "existential anxiety" or "social anxiety" proposed by Rardin (1998) and Leary (1982) was not mentioned by any of my participants. According to Rardin,

existential anxiety refers to the type of anxiety inherently built into the process of language learning. She characterizes those feelings as follows, "If I learn another language, I will somehow lose myself; I, as I know myself to be, will cease to exist" (p. 35).

One of the possible reasons that any of the experienced teachers I interviewed did not examine those theoretical perspectives might be that they are mostly successful L2 learners by themselves and they have not been overwhelmed by those feelings in the process of their learning. Therefore, it is necessary for these teachers to raise their awareness on student anxiety especially if they have more opportunities to teach beginning-level students because the students who are stuck in the beginning phase of language learning might be characterized as exhibiting the most unstable state of mind of all the language learning processes.

2. Language Learners' Amount of Anxiety in Four Skill Areas

As many of the participants expressed their inability to assess which language skill areas could create anxiety in students more than others, previous research on language anxiety also provided quite inconsistent results on the issue in question. Although the findings of the research showed that students experience the greatest amount of anxiety over speaking (Bailey, 1963; Horwitz et al., 1986), there is still little research available that has investigated language anxiety as it would relate to other language skills such as listening, reading, or writing. As the interview responses from my participants imply, it is quite conceivable that any of the four language skill areas can become a source of anxiety in students, depending on the individual learner differences, including learner language experiences of the relationship between the learner's L1 and L2.

3. Teachers' Perspectives on Manifestation of Anxiety in Students

The various manifestations of anxiety that my participants noticed in their students seem to be congruent with what has been reported in the previous research on language anxiety. Such symptoms they noticed in their students are: trembling, playing with their hair, short responses, nervous laughter, avoiding eye-contact, joking, stuttering or stammering as they talk, or sweating palms.

Although some of my participants expressed a concern about their inability to notice all the student anxieties, their perception of the students' anxious behaviors

or feelings generally corresponded to the research findings on anxiety manifestations by students. This result is likely to indicate that experienced teachers' perceptions of anxious behaviors in students are quite accurate enough for them to trust their own perceptions. In regards to teacher's perceptive sensitivity to student anxious behaviors, Young (1992) suggests that teachers should be sensitive to the signals students provide and recognize the behaviors for what they are. Additionally, he proposes that teachers should trust their own perceptions and work to reduce language anxiety (p. 169).

4. Teachers' Strategies to Reduce Student Anxiety in Class

My participants' views on language anxiety management seem to be fairly in accord with their own beliefs about teaching and their own assumptions about the role of the teacher.

The participants' commonly articulated beliefs about the role of the teacher are care takers, facilitators, motivators and counselors. Therefore, these beliefs are considered to be a reflection of their underlying assumption about teaching that "the classroom should be student-centered rather than teacher-centered" or that "the teacher should provide a comfortable learning environment for the students to maximize their learning."

A few of the participants maintained their beliefs about the teachers' roles as authoritarian figures. At the same time, they believed that the teachers facilitated students' learning and agreed that they can reduce student anxiety by sensitizing themselves to individual differences in their students, or by being aware of their own verbal behaviors such as personalized evaluative statements or certain questioning types which might induce anxiety in some students. It is interesting to discover that many of the anxiety reduction strategies that each of my participants used or suggested were commonly found in many of the existing research on language anxiety. However, as some of them confessed, it is also true that it is still not evident whether those anxiety management strategies can actually reduce anxiety in all the different students or in all the different situations.

VI. CONCLUSION

Although the previous research has provided invaluable insights into language

anxiety from the students' views, language anxiety due to its complex and multi-dimensional nature, still requires investigation from various perspectives or approaches. This study, conducted by means of in-depth interviews with seven experienced language teachers, attempted to offer some alternative insights on language anxiety from a different perspective.

Although the teachers' efforts to sensitize themselves to the students' anxiety are inconsistent with the students' actual perceptions of their own anxiety, the ultimate goal of eliminating unnecessary anxiety can still be achieved only when the continuous efforts from both sides are combined in a congruous manner.

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