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University Teachers' Strategies for Alleviating EFL Learner Anxiety

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Introduction

Emotions and language learning are never ignored in the psychology of language learning (PLL) as their reciprocal effects indeed play an influential role in one's L2 acquisition. Among those, anxiety is an emotional state which L2 learners may experience to some degree within their learning process because there exist more cognitive, cultural, and social issues in learning L2 than L1 (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope,1986). Thus, anxiety about language learning, although not studied as intensively as motivation or strategy use is usually exclusively discussed due to its significance.

In fact, the learner emotion is formally named Language Anxiety (LA), and has been examined from different angles, for example its sources and effects. A few studies have tried to investigate learner strategies for coping with LA. The data of these were mostly derived from the learners themselves, partly because learner individuality has proved, since the 1970s, to be a more powerful predictor of language development (Brown, 2000). Nevertheless, this does not suggest that language teachers play no role in the learning process, but rather they are essential, especially in preserving and/or maintaining positive learning psychology. As emphasized by Horwitz (2013) and Oxford and Ehrman (1993), teachers' knowledge of learner characteristics, including anxiety, is the key to their provision of effective instruction and support.

From the above discussion four issues are revealed: (1) the lack of teachers' voices, (2) the importance of their involvement, (3) their sensitivity to learners' psychological needs, and (4) their methods for inhibiting negative learning emotions. In an attempt to tackle and understand these aspects, this study devotes itself to investigating and answering the question of how tertiary teachers of EFL deal with their students' (potential) learning anxiety in the classroom.

Literature Review

Language Anxiety

Anxiety has been closely linked with L2 development for some decades. It was, however, not until 1986 that Horwitz and her colleagues affirmed its specific role in language learning by developing a foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS) that examined a learner's degree of LA. As a situation-specific state, LA concerns the anxious feelings provoked where a foreign or second language is

learned or used. Specifically, MacIntyre and Gregersen depict it as 'feelings of worry and negative, fear-related emotions associated with learning or using a language that is not an individual's mother tongue and especially relevant in a classroom where self-representation takes place' (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012, p. 103; Gregersen & Macintyre, 2014, p. 3). Given its negativity, Horwitz (2017) argues that LA's potential hindrance to L2 learning is generally considered self-evident. It has also been demonstrated that LA is not only pervasive among L2 learners, but also negatively impacts on their learning experiences (Daubney, Dewaela, & Gkonou, 2017).

Under such circumstances, realizing the causes of LA is undoubtedly the key to coping with it. According to Horwitz (2017), the most fundamental source of LA is a learner's difficulty expressing themselves authentically in a non-native language, which can severely challenge their L1 identity or self-concepts. Regarding LA and the L2 self, research has established that anxious learners are inclined to have low self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (Gkonou, 2012; Sampasivam & Clément, 2014). LA has also been discovered in those with perfectionism (Dewaele, 2017) and low tolerance of ambiguity (Dewaele & Ip, 2013).

As for interpersonal factors, comparison or competitiveness was found to be a direct contributor to the formation of L2 anxiety (Yan & Horwitz, 2008). Moreover, because L2 learners' self-expression in the language may be constrained, their acknowledgement of being a competent communicator (in L1) may be so challenged as to pose a threat to their face in the language classroom (Dörnyei, 2007). They are concerned about the occurrence of unpleasant situations, for example, exposing their disadvantages or making fools of themselves. Consequently, associated with certain learning experiences, this worry can evolve into anxiety about using the language in context.

Apart from the above, there are five more (thematic) causes of LA listed by Young (1991), based on her review of existing literature. They are L2 learner beliefs, L2 instructor beliefs, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedures, and language testing. In concise terms, these actually illustrate the anxiety emanating from inconsistencies between the learner's and the teacher's expectations and thoughts of language learning and teaching. Furthermore, the latter's harsh teaching method or style like correcting every error made can be problematic. From this reading of the relevant literature and Horwitz's (2017) argument, I argue that the personal and interpersonal factors may be more common and influential than the others. Nevertheless, all these problems suggest the importance of the teacher's understanding of their students' learning characteristics to the provision of effective guidance and support.

Management of Learner Anxiety

Compared to the amount of LA research conducted with learners, there is far less related literature based on language teachers' perceptions or perspectives. Nonetheless, Ohata (2005) interviewed seven high school and university teachers about EFL/SL learner anxiety, and one question asked about their methods for reducing such emotions. Their responses provided two major types of strategies: (1) 'creating a comfortable classroom environment' and (2) 'instructional procedures that encourage student involvement' (p. 147). The former involved giving fun activities, telling jokes, and playing music; the latter was centered around asking open-ended questions, promoting group work, setting realistic expectations, and recasting students' errors. Horwitz (2017, p. 42) contends that the two methods 'will remain the best options.' Apart from these means, the latter particularly encourages the teacher to disclose and discuss the issue of language anxiety in the classroom so that students can acknowledge its existence and its widespread presence and the need for coping strategies. That is, raising learners' awareness of their psychology can help them better understand themselves and manage their emotions in learning—whether they are positive or negative. Tactics like these, as they are, seemingly aim to address the anxiety in its very sources instead of provocative situations per se, which arguably demonstrates the teacher's consciousness of L2 anxiety and attempt to mitigate or inhibit it before it develops.

Methodology

Participants

Seven native Chinese-speaking teachers of EFL were invited to participate in the research, but the data collected from the fifth teacher was discarded as it yielded little insightful data. The six teachers were all female and were currently teaching University English (for general purposes: EGP) to students at different proficiency levels at a university in Southern Taiwan. Most of their students were non-English related majors at the time. They had taught EFL for some years (between 6 and 28 years). Moreover, the participants had at least a master's or doctoral degree in TESOL or relevant subjects from overseas or home universities. To maintain confidentiality, their names have been replaced by codes: T02, T03, T04, T06, T07, and T08.

Instrument

To answer the research question, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the teachers because their 'feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and views' could be probed and prompted and 'versions and accounts of situations' learnt (Wellington, 2000, p. 71). Furthermore, an interview protocol is allowed so that the interviewer can avoid digression and make adjustments when necessary. The guide had three parts: (1) warm-up questions, (2) LA-related questions, and (3) an ending remark. Specifically, apart from their experiences with anxious learners, the teachers needed to recollect their approaches to learner anxiety in the EFL classroom, i.e. 'Do you try to help students reduce learning anxiety in the English classroom?'. This question came up later after the interviewees answered the other questions on the interview schedule. Nevertheless, they were free to share their treatment of anxious learners at any time during the interview.

Procedure

Before the interview began, they all had read the research information sheet and signed the consent form. A digital voice recorder was then turned on to record their responses. Each interview was conducted face to face in Chinese, lasting approximately one hour. When coming to an end, the interviewees were allowed to add additional comments if any, informed of the need for their examination of the transcripts produced later.

Analysis

The recordings were transcribed verbatim and saved as electronic documents, which were then imported into NVivo 10 for further processing. Reading hardcopies of the transcripts closely, coding started off by bracketing the lines which answered the interview questions. The responses were then coded via the software. Because some of them reflected more than one quality, they were given two codes (or more). To categorize the codes, they were listed on a spreadsheet and grouped on a homogeneous basis. In this stage, a code could still be assigned into more than one category if it fitted into two contexts. Finally, categories sharing the same feature were grouped together to form a theme. No category could appear in two themes since a theme was the top level of the classification and had its own distinct properties.

Results

From the collected data emerged a total of seven themes, only three of which were chosen to be presented in this section, partly due to the prescribed scope of this report. The selection criteria involved the number of codes comprising the theme, the literature previously conducted and discussed, and findings intriguing or unexpected. Consequently, the three themes selected were 'making students ready for the task or challenge', 'making use of peers' influence', and 'trying to inhibit students' negative emotions.' Detailed accounts of these strategies are described in the next section.

Making Students Ready for the Task or Challenge

The teachers try to acquaint their learners with the ongoing activity and give them another chance if their first attempt fails. This strategy, in short, contains two sub-tactics: (1) 'provision of adequate information' and (2) 'giving more preparation/practice time'.

Provision of adequate information

A few teachers reported clarifying or explaining some of their classroom procedures in class, such as how an activity is conducted or why grouping is done by the teacher:

> Sometimes [I] may invite the more competent students to … answer [the question] or do the task first in order to let them [anxious ones] have the chance to look at other models or examples. **(T03)**

> [Considering my sometimes random grouping of students], my experience shows me there is no problem as I did tell them the reason why I regrouped them [myself]: [I want to] give them an opportunity to talk to those with whom they are unfamiliar because … the peers students choose to sit with are the like-minded ones…if you discuss with those you never interact with, maybe you will get some enlightenment. **(T08)**

These teachers seemingly try to resolve the susceptible confusion or uncertainty about the teacher's activity or instruction due to their unfamiliarity with the situation.

Giving more preparation/practice time

Instead of forcing them to overcome their difficulties immediately, some teachers allowed their (anxious) learners some extra time to calm down and/or re-prepare when unable to complete a task successfully:

> If there is really a need, I will [say] 'Please sit down'. I will directly tell them, for instance, 'I will come back to ask you again after few minutes or everyone is finished'. That is, I give them more time, and let them look at how others do it. **(T03)**

> I do let them feel that they are spared the embarrassment. For example, sometimes I ask them 'Do you still need a few [more] minutes or you still need to think about it?' (T03)
> I will say 'You speak later or you go and release your emotion first' or I will say 'Calm down'. I will not be so strict to them and say, for example, 'You must speak now'. **(T07)**

The above means, although benevolent, may be problematic in a sense. That is, the learners have a chance of seeking peers' help or redirecting their attention to the task itself. However, their anxious feelings could still accumulate as they are not exempted from the situation.

Making Use of Peers' Influence

The teachers also have 'mutual help' realised in their classroom, especially when the student sinks into the mire, rather than making them despair. 'Immediacy' and 'community' are the essence of this thematic strategy. Two related means are as follows.

Peers' support within reach

Three teachers mentioned permitting or inviting other peers to help out those failing to cope with a question or a task. That is, getting rescued is never impossible so long as someone needs it.

> If I find that some students are too anxious to answer, … [and] still want them to answer, I may give them hints…or I ask them to appeal to their group members for help or the like. **(T02)**

> I never stop their classmates from helping them… That person may be from the same team or even sometimes there has been someone telling them the answer further away. However, if still too anxious to hear it, I will tell them 'Your peer is telling the answer and so you only need to repeat it, which is fine'. **(T03)**

> When they cannot answer, I give them some hints or request [other] classmates [to help them]: 'Is there anyone who knows [the answer] or the like?'. Then, I give the answer at the end. **(T06)**

From these examples, it is clear that these teachers are also quite helpful to their students, especially poor performers.

Use of group work

Peer help also happens in group work, but this operates naturally without the teacher's intervention. This category is, therefore, considered an individual method of tackling learner anxiety, which can promote participation:

> Normally, I help them as much as possible. The best way is group work. When working alone, maybe sometimes they cannot finish it by themselves. If the situation permits, I employ group work as much as possible. Then, [they can] ask their classmates to help them… I think they are relatively less anxious in that way. **(T06)**

> [I] also utilize peer pressure. I mean I may want them to do group work and come out to write something as sometimes they do not want to write or the like [or] feel it is boring in class. However, when it comes to working as a group, others will affect them. They will feel 'Ok, let's do it together then'… I rarely make them feel this course is very stressful. **(T06)**

This indicates that group work is so versatile and functional as to satisfy both the learner's learning and psychological needs.

Trying to Inhibit Students' Negative Emotions

This measure is characterized by 'precaution' and 'compensation'. The teachers acknowledge learner imperfection in the learning process and performance by showing genuine attentiveness to their students. Five sub-strategies are listed in the next section.

Opportune support from me

Some instructors spoke of their active supportive approach to the learners who encountered troubles during their participation in activities.

> [When they cannot answer or speak,] you may use some questions to guide them to answer your questions. Then, they do not have to speak themselves from the beginning to the end. Or, for example, while they are describing an incident, I need to guess what they want to say. Then, I need to ask them 'Are you trying to say so and so?' They normally feel all you said is helpful. They will say 'yes' to you. Then, you just tell them to repeat it themselves. **(T03)**

> They say 'Teacher, how do I answer this? I do not understand'. Only when I am walking around, they will ask me, and I will give them hints or tell them the answer… I know sometimes they act like this…When they are preparing, you walk around to see if they [have some blanks] filled in nothing. Then, you say to them … 'Do you need any help?'. After they have tried once or twice, [they know that] the teacher does help them and so they dare to [ask me for help]. **(T06)**

These teachers demonstrate their approachableness and sensitivity to learner difficulties. This further strengthens their students' trust in them.

Individual instruction

The teachers attempted to help the anxious individuals with their emotional and/or learning difficulties face to face behind the scenes:

> **T02**: [As for] some students, I ask them to come to see me later.
> ...
> **R**: What instructions do you normally give?
> …
> **T02**: [I will] ask them again as I want to check they are really equipped with [the knowledge]. They feel nervous because of their incompetence or they cannot answer due to anxiety… If they aren't, I just teach them. If they are, I am fine.

> In every session, there is always some time when you have to walk around to look at what these students are doing. So, when you discover [something] wrong, you may actually need to chat with them a bit. Or, because they have been very nervous, you just do not talk to them in class, but ask them to come to you and have a chat with them in private. Sometimes this helps, but sometimes it does not. **(T03)**

> **T07**: I always [alleviate their anxiety] after class. I do not do so on the spot. The more you say, the more anxious they are.
> …
> **R**: So, you do not deal with it in class.
> **T07**: If they are too anxious to speak, I will say '[You can] speak later' or 'I will give you another chance tomorrow' or 'Come to me after class to do it privately'.
> …
> **T07**: They know that their score is a bit low or… their performance in the midterm exam may not be good. Then, I will remind them or ask about their study methods. For some, I just start to chat with them by accident.

Ways of commenting on student performance

Several teachers shared the art of giving feedback in class to prevent learning anxiety:

T04: If sometimes their performance is perhaps particularly poor, I may tell them 'You only have 30 seconds this time. If your test lasts two minutes (.)' Then, I let them know their [performance] like this is not ok.
R: But you do not directly say that [performance] like this is no good…
T04: No. Then, I may say 'It would be better if you could add certain contents.'

After [they] finish their presentation, … I normally talk about the merit first, what is good, and what can be improved later… Mainly, at the beginning, [you] try not to first discuss their errors and make them brave to come out to speak more often… A little later, I can gradually add in some comments [for improvement]. **(T06)**

This stress is generated from their thought that their English [ability] seems inferior. Considering this type of stress, my personal experience is that [I] need to deal with it individually. For example, once this student performs well, [I] tell other classmates publically that they spoke very well. I think that this is fairly helpful for students. **(T08)**

Avoidance of anxiety-provoking factors

The classroom was intended to feel comfortable and secure. Most of the teachers attempted to avoid contributing factors to learner anxiety in different learning situations:

I normally do not let students…come up to write the sentences that I have not checked yet. I normally walk around ensuring their sentences are correct. I make it sure that they do not lose face when on stage. **(T07)**

T08: About grouping, I usually let them
R: Choose [their own members] themselves?
T08: Yes. They also sit with their own relatively familiar friends. Thus, in terms of my current class, there is no such follow-up situation [impacts on interactions] as you mentioned.

Giving easier tests

Tests are usually nerve-wracking as they can affect the student's academic performance. Nevertheless, a few teachers purposefully manipulate the level of difficulty of a test to boost their students' positive affect.

T06: For example, when a student was in the first year, their scores were always 70, 80 or so. However, now in Level 6 in the second year, suddenly, they always only get 50 or 60. They just start to
R: Feel very anxious?
T06: Yes. They wonder why there is suddenly such a big difference [and so] start to feel unsure of themselves. I feel that sometimes we try not to make tests too difficult. I mean I do feel that you should give them the chance to feel that they still make some progress.

Because tests for them are a very important factor causing stress and demotivation, I say if they do (.) The results of their mid/final exams are often bad, so I normally give them relatively not difficult

tests or, in speaking, although I score them, I tell them 'As long as you speak or perform fairly well, I normally do not give low scores'… I also tell them 'This way can help you perhaps compensate for poorer outcomes.' **(T07)**

Discussion

By investigating language teachers' strategies for coping with learner anxiety, insights into the issues proposed at the beginning have been gained. Compared with the literature, more specific, detailed strategies were shared in this study, which arguably compensates for the lack of knowledge of teacher strategies. Nonetheless, in line with Ohata's (2005) findings, the teachers of this study also tried to make their classrooms comfortable and encouraging. This is particularly apparent when they actively 'tried to inhibit students' negative emotions' in class. Among the means employed, 'promoting group work' and 'recasting student errors' were implemented by both groups of teacher participants.

When looking into the findings, there were undoubtedly many tactics used in class, which had been integrated into their classroom instruction. It is also arguable that the teachers managed to be approachable and helpful to their students. That is, 'I am here to help you learn better, rather than making you embarrassed'. Furthermore, although their sensitivity to students' psychological fluctuations was not examined here, their interview responses illustrated their acute awareness of such issues as where anxiety may occur and what the possible cause is. For example, T07 checked the student's work before letting them present it in the front to protect them from losing face, a significant cause of LA (Dörnyei, 2007). It is worth noting that the teachers' approaches to learning anxiety are cause-oriented. More precisely, they did not abandon the anxious activity, but targeted the source of the anxiety itself instead. This is arguably more effective as a classroom activity is the context where anxiety occurs and the reason for its appearance in there turns out to be the actual problem needing tackling.

Some of the reported tactics may be considered common and familiar, yet the findings as a whole indicate that conscious and skilful use of their strategies were made by the teachers. They understood when to use them, what they can help, and where they fit even though the effectiveness of a strategy was not definite.

Conclusion

Despite its lack of male teachers' voices and the inability to tell how effective a strategy is, the study has indeed made a contribution to language teacher strategy use for tackling learners' negative emotions. Through interviews with six experienced EFL teachers, the ways they addressed learning anxiety in class were disclosed. They allowed students to help each other when encountering difficulties, familiarized with classroom activities or tasks by demonstrating or giving another chance, and protected from potential anxiety-triggering factors by offering and making thoughtful support and adjustments to feedback and testing.

Nonetheless, none of the teachers discussed with their students the issues of LA, which Horwtiz (2017), however, strongly suggests language teachers do in class. Discussing LA with learners can raise their consciousness of its essence and pervasiveness so that they may well reflect on their own learning, develop coping strategies, and eliminate fears. The teacher can also benefit from this as they have the opportunity to examine their perceptions of students' learning and adjust teaching if necessary. In addition, as advanced, experienced language learners, they should share or think of effective coping skills with their students. Receiving some guidance, anxious learners may gain easier some idea of how to help themselves. Finally, the teachers were able to embed and employ various coping strategies in the course of teaching. Nevertheless, they are encouraged to devise their own special treatment for LA, thereby deepening their understanding of their students' psychology of learning in the classroom.

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