

## RESEARCH &amp; REVIEWS | 研究 &amp; レビュー

## Dealing with Student Language Anxiety: How Can We Create a Less Stressful English Classroom?



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“I feel anxious when I present my own opinion in front of others.” (Student A)

“I feel uneasy when I have to deal with my weak points in English.” (Student K)

Have you ever encountered students who seemed to be anxious in your English classroom? It is said that about one-third of students usually feel moderately to strongly anxious about language learning (Horwitz, 2013). The opening statements are two examples of student voices heard in my class a few years ago, as part of an English skills training class targeting vocational school students in Sapporo. This class was designed to prepare them for the English proficiency STEP test (i.e., EIKEN), and these students were practicing for the final interview part of the test. When I asked students to present their own opinions in front of the class as part of an interview simulation, some showed a sense of hesitation, saying they do not want to become

humiliated in front of the audience because of their perceived deficiency in English speaking skills.

These feelings of learners can be labeled language anxiety, which is defined as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second or foreign language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). The negative impact of anxiety on second/foreign language learners has been demonstrated in a number of previous studies in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The research suggests that anxious learners tend to have negative reactions toward their errors (Gregersen, 2003), underestimate their abilities compared to relaxed students (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), and fear being negatively evaluated by other students (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Students have described presentation practice as troublesome; it seems that these feelings of annoyance and anxiety contribute to their unwillingness to speak actively in their English classes. It is quite a serious problem for those who are severely anxious about speaking and performing in English.

I have been teaching English for over 6 years, in high school, vocational school, and university up to the present. During that period, I have encountered many students who seemed to be very anxious in studying English and have, as a result, had experiences of teaching such anxious students. This led me to ask the following questions: “How can I teach English in a less-stressful manner?”, and “How can I help anxious students feel more relaxed in the English classroom?”

In an attempt to understand better how to alleviate student language anxiety, I developed the Anxiety-reducing Strategy Scale (ARSS; Fujii, 2015) and conducted three research projects as part of my doctoral studies: (a) a conceptualization of strategies for reducing language anxiety, (b) an exploration of the effectiveness of strategies for reducing language anxiety through classroom intervention, and (c) an evaluation of the changes in student language anxiety levels and sources of anxiety through a quasi-experimental study. I worked on this final research project for a total of 15 weeks, teaching students in the experimental group and using specific strategies to help them reduce their language anxiety. I then compared the results with a non-equivalent control group taught by another teacher without any treatments for reducing anxiety, during the same period of 15 weeks. The results indicated that the anxiety-reducing strategies were effective in reducing student communication apprehension, and multiple anxiety sources decreased as an outcome of interventions in the experimental group. From the comparison with the control group, I was able to establish the effectiveness of using anxiety-reducing strategies with my students (Fujii, 2017). This whole research project had a strong impact on my own teaching style developing appropriate teaching practices to make the learning context as relaxing as possible.

In the literature, there has been a spirited discussion on interpreting anxiety positively (i.e., facilitating anxiety) or negatively (i.e., debilitating anxiety). Although some researchers insist that facilitating anxiety leads to a better performance as a result of increased effort, the more common sense of

the term “anxiety” is debilitating, as negative effects of anxiety are harmful to performance (MacIntyre, 2002). Language anxiety is considered as a factor that negatively influences the quality of language learning, and usually results in unsatisfactory learning outcomes (Alrabai, 2014). Indeed, most studies have established the negative relationship between language anxiety and performance (Aida, 1994; Horwitz et al., 1986; Park & French, 2013; Woodrow, 2006), showing a clear correlation between high anxiety and low language performance. In my case, none of my teaching experiences suggest that positive outcomes will result if my teaching practices increase the stress and anxieties for students in my classrooms; on the contrary, increased anxiety generally leads to demotivation and greater lack of confidence in speaking.

How can we help highly anxious students feel more relaxed in the English classroom? According to Horwitz et al. (1986), when dealing with student language anxiety, teachers have two options: They can help students learn to cope with the existing anxiety-provoking situations, or they can make the learning situation less-stressful for their learners in addition to creating a less stressful classroom environment. In addition to creating a less stressful classroom environment, teachers should be sensitive to their students’ anxiousness and help them cope with these feelings. Dealing with language anxiety is indispensable for having students enjoy learning English as well as increasing student engagement in the English classroom. To better support our learners, we should focus on how to make the classroom a more relaxing space where students will/may become more engaged with English by working

with their classmates and teachers in more cooperative ways.

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