

# A NOTE ON ANXIETY IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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## INTRODUCTION

**Writing in 1983, H.H. Stern said that "it is universally acknowledged that language learning presents a massive learning problem" (Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching). Although an openness to both new language forms and the concomitant norms of social behavior are essential preconditions for successful second language learning, individual personality remains a primary determining factor in language acquisition. Among the various personality variables cited in his work, perseverance, ego-involvement and clear goal orientation figure prominently as traits more likely to be conducive to successful learning, while self-consciousness and a lack of self-awareness contribute to a state of anxiety that retards the process of learning.**

**Stern's argument can be challenged at three levels. In the first place, learning and the acquisition of language are implicitly identified as one and the same thing, an assumption that has been challenged, most notably by Krashen's concept of comprehensible input (1980,1983 etc.). Secondly, there is a tendency to regard specific human characteristics as likely to prove counter-productive in pedagogic terms, as facets of individuality that require remedial treatment if they are not to hinder acquisition. Thirdly, and central to this discussion is Stern's presumed acceptance of the fact that anxiety in the learning process is synonymous with discomfort and low achievement in the learner. Therefore, it is essential to distinguish between anxiety as descriptive of an individual personality profile and its more prescriptive application to difficulties encountered in the learning of a second language.**

## COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

**There is no broad agreement on either the definition of anxiety or how it should be measured in terms of its effect on language learning. Krashen's fundamental distinction between learning and acquisition establishes a psychological basis to input that Horwitz, Scovel and**

**others have applied to their analyses of language anxiety. However, White (1987), in rejecting the theory of comprehensible input argues instead that the learner's existing linguistic state is what determines acceptance or rejection of new input. This, as I shall attempt to show later adds a new perspective to our understanding of anxiety.**

**In this essay I shall not focus on test or exam related anxiety but on communication apprehension that arises from the need to communicate orally. It has been located by Daly (1985/91) in more general social anxiety which, in turn adversely affects language learning. Scovel (1978) doubts whether such a linear relationship between anxiety and performance truly exists, emphasizing instead the distinction between beneficial, energizing anxiety and its excessive, debilitating forms. In both cases, attention to psychological factors has informed the many studies undertaken in order to measure the causes and manifestations of anxiety. Behavioural observations including frequency of stammering; physiological assessments that take into account sweating, pulse rates and accelerated heart beats and self reports such as the P.R.C.A. which subdivide communication apprehension into four categories ( public speaking, meetings, groups, dyadic exchanges) are all based on the premise that underlying personality traits account for the anxiety found in language learning. Consequently, explanations of anxiety have ranged from the genetic transmission of certain predispositions that do not account for the equally significant environmental factors that can cause anxiety to those that attach second language proficiency to early skills development and the system of rewards and punishments in first language acquisition.**

**However, the fear of communicating is only one reason why learners do not communicate and similarly, as Skehan has argued (1989), there is no guarantee that the more facilitating types of anxiety will be channeled into educationally rewarding activities. Measuring anxiety has produced confused and misleading results. Swain's survey of French immersion school children (1996) detected a negative correlation between anxiety and only one measure of their proficiency while others have revealed complete positive correlations. Alpert and Haber devised a Facilitating / Debilitating Anxiety Scale to show that adrenaline driven anxiety tends to result in improved performance but that fear driven anxiety produces**

**the opposite effect. Steinberg's 1982 findings however showed that all anxiety induced learners spoke more objectively than those with no induced anxiety: these examples illustrate how difficult it is to draw conclusions from empirical evidence that seem to meet quite different criteria.**

### **COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT**

**The Learning /Acquisition hypothesis formulated by Krashen regards learning and acquisition as two distinct ways of developing competence in a second language, the latter being a subconscious process that matches identically the process whereby first language acquisition takes place. Knowledge of grammar and rules are consciously learned and act as a monitor, editing output and paying specific attention to form but fluency of utterance and accuracy in language performance are, in Krashen's theory, the result of what has been acquired, not what has been learned. In this respect, exposure to a second language can only be determined by the amount of comprehensible input a learner is exposed to, a view endorsed by Long's research of 1983 which showed that children whose primary source of comprehensible input was the classroom do better in the long run than adults who are exposed to input in different environments. The input hypothesis stresses learner defined acquisition and implies that manipulation of input by outsiders is futile because only the individual can achieve  $i + 1$ . However, acquisition defined as rule addition overlooks the possibility of learners making either incorrect generalizations about the L2 or drawing false analogies with their L1; problems that may not be detected even with simplified input and which could heighten learner anxiety in the sense that retrospective correction can undermine earlier acquired confidence.**

**Input, for Krashen, can be prevented from reaching the Language Acquisition Device by an Affective Filter and a high filter may be caused by low motivation, high student anxiety or low student self-esteem. Of these attitudinal variables, anxiety results from a rise in the affective filter during adolescence which helps to explain why young learners appear superior in terms of L2 acquisition. The work of Smith (1983) and Stevick (1976) focuses upon the degree of anxiety associated with performance evaluation within the academic and social contexts;**

**learners who feel they are on the defensive or excluded from the "club" of fellow learners tend to regard the classroom as a place where weaknesses will be exposed and this in turn leads to a high affective filter. As a result, it is conceivable that the three performance related anxieties ( communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation) derive, in part from environmental factors that exacerbate feelings of negative self-estimation. Stevick concludes that language is acquired when comprehensible input is received in a low anxiety situation, a view that foregrounds the importance of situational context in the acquisition of language.**

### **ANXIETY AND MOTIVATION**

**I shall consider methods and methodologies later but at this stage, it is necessary to concentrate on anxiety as it affects motivation and to approach with some caution the findings of behavioural and physiological anxiety tests on the grounds that the various models constructed to account for affect in learning have been weakened by intervening variables such as the children's level of intelligence, the difficulty of the learning skill and the degree of familiarity with the task (Scovel:1991). Alpert and Haber's anxiety scale indicates that learning is enhanced by both positive and negative motivation in which the sympathetic and parasympathetic components of the autonomic nervous system work together in much the same way that facilitating anxiety motivates while debilitating anxiety serves to warn. This is true of the "normal" learner whose emotional reactions correlate with the balanced functions of the limbic system from which affective arousal springs. However, such equivalence is rare and Kleinmann's studies of L2 adolescents revealed the extent to which facilitating anxiety motivated the learners to "fight" while debilitating anxiety encouraged some learners to "flee" tasks that diverged structurally from their L1.**

**Similar connections with mainstream psychology inform Gardner's analysis of motivation as measured by the approval motive, self-flattery, response set and verbal intelligence. The self-reporting data he compiled in the form of student questionnaires though, do not account for the possibility of fabricated responses that appear more desirable than honest and objective. Moreover, there is no proven correlation**

between verbal intelligence in L1 learners and L2 proficiency which suggests a causal link between achievement and motivation, with motivation the result rather than the cause of achievement. Indeed, Hermann's work with a class of German fifth-formers (1980) revealed less negativity present than in a class of comparably intelligent beginners and this led her to conclude that the success of the instruction had produced the different levels of motivation. Consequently, anxiety associated with poor or average performance can be seen (and shown by Spielberger's findings) to be the result rather than the cause of low achievement. If high anxiety is the corollary of low motivation, it follows that it produces different effects at different stages of learning; effectively becoming less debilitating the higher up the scale of language acquisition. A further motivational variable proposed by Clement (1980) and developed by Bailey (1983) centres on social and situational setting. Primary motivational processes reflect the attitude of the learner to the target language community and bear witness to the conflicting forces of a desire to integrate on the one hand and a fear of assimilation on the other. When integrative-ness outweighs the latter, it sets up a far more positive disposition to the target language. Furthermore, a mono-cultural setting that removes the fear of assimilation helps to determine motivational levels but in a multi-cultural setting, the primary process is conditioned by the frequency and quality of contact with the target language community. This factor plays a significant role in determining both the individual's self-confidence and anxiety for language learning while accounting for varying levels of motivation.

The various models and analyses presented so far tend to uphold a central idea: that second language anxiety is measurable largely on its own terms. The relationship between anxiety as a personal trait and learning related anxiety is somewhat tenuous and most studies have discovered a less than world shattering negative correlation of -0.30. Skehan has argued (1989) that "anxiety research has been rather narrow in scope" and this is borne out by the fact that most anxiety studies have been conducted on EFL secondary school and adult learners with little attention having been given to learners under the age of ten. And yet the "narrowness" of the research actually goes some way to substantiating the situation-specific analysis of anxiety, developed by

**K.M. Bailey who has numbered comparison of oneself with other students, one's relationship with the teacher, tests and comparison with oneself and one's personal standards as being of seminal importance in the understanding of how public performance in language learning is linked to anxiety.**

**In a survey of Texas university students (Price:1991), irrational fear, bordering on hysterical "language phobia" was discovered to be linked specifically to the fear of having to perform orally and was less intensely felt during written examinations. In other words, being called upon to deliver output brought about acute feelings of anxiety. What is harder to gauge quantitatively is whether the underlying cause of anxiety is restricted to the output stage or has its origins in either the learning or acquisition stages. Anxiety, like language learning is a conscious state or process and if one takes the analogy further, the physiological manifestations of anxiety and the underlying psychological turbulence that gives rise to them are "comprehensible" in much the same way that rules of grammar and vocabulary definitions are understood. If, as Krashen argues, we monitor output by implementing what we have "learnt", it is reasonable to suggest that anxiety is implicated in the learning stage. Therefore, a student who is conscious of his output draws qualitative parallels between the accuracy of his utterances and the formally understood rules. The results of this and other surveys have also shown that some of the most anxious students actually performed well in oral examinations, from which it could be concluded that anxiety cannot be said to have its origins in the acquisition stage. Furthermore, as acquisition is an unconscious process, consciously felt anxiety would appear to be the result of a perceived disjuncture between learning and output.**

### **COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT VERSUS NECESSARY INPUT**

**However, Krashen has been criticized (White:1986) for focusing on comprehensible input at the expense of necessary input. Implicit in the theory of  $i + 1$  is the belief that it is not necessary to concentrate on structures not yet acquired because they will be in the input and that invariably, teachers do not know what the learner is ready for or what the relevant input should be. Although he accepts that structural**

teaching has a role in the learning process, it can be argued that it is also beneficial at the acquisition stage.

Acquisition seen as rule adding on an unconscious level rests on acceptance of the notion that learners recognize a gap between their existing grammar and the input and absorb the new rule to close it. However, there are situations where L1 "interference" may necessitate the learner losing a rule rather than adding one. Irregular past forms modify learned rules but in view of the lack of any additional or connotational meaning, they can be absorbed as exceptions to the existing rule. In Krashen's terms, this is not problematic but the following sentences are:

A. I like cricket very much.

B. I like very much cricket.

Unlike the contrasting form of the irregular past tense, learners who assume that sentence B is correct (which in Greek, for example it is) would receive nothing in input to show that it is not. As White has argued (Ibid.), comprehensible input will indicate the existence of sentence A but not B, which in mono-lingual classes, subject to the same input, can lead to reinforcement of the error. In order to trigger a grammar change in the learner's system, pointing out the gap through grammar teaching might "...be a source of useful input to L2 acquisition." (Ibid)

This contention is based on the premise that a degree of intervention on the teacher's part may, through error correction, facilitate acquisition and thus lower the affective filter. In this sense, I would argue that the underlying cause of anxiety lies within the learning-acquisition process itself and that despite the palpably obvious symptoms of consciously experienced anxiety, there is also unconscious anxiety that results from an inner antagonism between the L1 and input from the L2.

Comprehensible input that, even after repeated demonstration fails to reach the LAD, is possibly being resisted by deep seated L1 generalizations and preconceptions that the input itself has failed to correct additively. The unconscious anxiety this creates is transferred via the monitor to output where it consciously materializes as an attempt to put rules learnt, yet only partly acquired, into practice. Allied with this, yet inextricably linked to it is the learner's awareness that his communicative choices and the authenticity of his utterances

are restricted. When self expression as evidence of personality and identity is confined, it develops into an unconscious anxiety that adversely affects output while the output itself appears reflective of low self-esteem.

### **PEDAGOGICAL 'HIGHS AND LOWS'**

Anxiety as a factor in second language competence has important pedagogical implications and it is one of the most crucial affective variables that teaching methods such as the Silent Way, the Natural Approach, Total Physical Response and Suggestopedia have gone some way to try and reduce. All these methods recognize how important affective motivation is in second language learning. Kleinmann's anxiety test results ostensibly justify the need to reduce debilitating anxiety while building on facilitating anxiety at the three stages of input, processing and output. Skeptics are quick to point out though that Kleinmann's findings merely show that students learn better in a non-threatening and supportive environment; in other words, no one method is unequivocally endorsed because no one method can possibly take into account all the affective and cognitive variables that influence learners either individually or collectively.

Total Physical Response, devised by James Asher, is based on three learning hypotheses that either facilitate or inhibit learning. The third of these considers stress reduction to be the key to greater learning. Its principal objective is to teach basic speaking skills through action based imperative forms that resemble the stress free environment of first language acquisition. TPR casts the learner in the role of listener and performer and as such, he is not obliged to speak until a language base has been internalized. However, as a method it tends to deal with only the early stages of learning and concentrates on reducing stress in very contrived situational contexts, where the obligation to speak does not pertain. This has little to offer adults in the "real world" and fails to acknowledge the fact that stress is often a cumulative factor in the learning process.

A similar weakness afflicts Community Language Learning in that despite the explicit attention given to psychological problems



encountered in the learning process, it has the tendency to create too secure an environment, which from an educational perspective can be counterproductive. CLL aims to involve the whole "being" in so far as an individual is both the subject and the object of a transmitted message and his learning is both cognitive and affective. In this sense, learners and teachers interact as members of a community and difficulties can be resolved through counseling; anger and anxiety are dealt with by the teacher's "..counseling sensitivity..", an indication of "..deep personal investment" (Curran:1976). This method, however places an enormous obligation on teachers who must perforce be both counselors and teachers. Moreover, the absence of a syllabus is likely to lead to a degree of obfuscation concerning aims and objectives which in turn is likely to undermine a clear notion of what the comprehensible input should be. Anxious students may have their anxiety compounded by the suspicion that classes are directionless and need the intervening presence of a teacher. Consequently, student rejection of the CLL ethos remains a distinct possibility and serves to show that elimination of inhibiting (sic) situational factors does not necessarily bring about a corresponding reduction in debilitating anxiety.

Suggestopedia, devised by Lozanov as a "suggestive-desuggestive ritual placebo system" (1978) appears on the surface to have originated, like the machine for extracting sunlight from cucumbers, in Swift's Grand Academy of Lagado. The risible solemnity of Lozanov's method involving recitations of texts to the strains of Telemann and Bach is likely, in my experience of teaching adolescents, to lead to derisive barracking and classroom chaos. The only discernible change on the anxiety scale would be an appreciable increase in teacher stress when trying to maintain order with only a baroque music ensemble for support. Suggestopedia may work with open-minded adults but the bogus therapeutic claims made for it indicate that it is likely to be the last resort for people whose anxiety runs far deeper than that provoked by language learning.

The Natural Approach is based on a theory of language acquisition rather than a theory of the structure of language. As outlined by Krashen and Terrell (1983), " the use of language in communicative situations without recourse to the native language.." establishes the primacy of

**the communicative function of language. With an emphasis on meaning instead of form, Krashen's approach concentrates pedagogic attention on achieving as much comprehensible input as possible, employing a wide range of vocabulary, focusing classroom attention on listening and reading, from which speaking should emerge in gradatal stages and lowering the affective filter in order to elicit meaningful communication. He cites the success of the Immersion Schools in Canada, where the approach has enabled student speech to develop on its own without being hindered by error correction or grammatical accuracy at all times. As a result, students reach a point of proficiency, beyond which they can communicate and understand (albeit not flawlessly) outside the classroom.**

**The NA is designed to promote affectively positive attitudes and it was against this background that A. Koch conducted a survey of 119 students in the first two years of NA Spanish classes at the University of California (1984). Almost 90% of the students who described themselves as not by nature nervous experienced only moderate or minimal anxiety but 20% of those who were by nature extremely nervous remained so. The activities that related to students on a personal level were the most comforting but most agreed that frequent exposure to NA activities led to a proportionate decrease in anxiety. Certain performance activities including oral presentations elicited mixed responses but the conclusion drawn from this was that the activities should not be abandoned but made less threatening. Despite the comprehensiveness of the survey, Koch and Terrell admit (1991) that "...there would seem to be no simple remedy for student anxiety", an observation reinforced by the claim that techniques should not be judged good or bad but rather as useful or recommended for learners at different levels of acquisition.**

**Advocates of Task Based Language Teaching share Krashen's rejection of formal teaching on the basis that it has no real effect on developmental sequences and that it positively affects only certain learning strategies. Task as a unit of analysis that provides an integrated and coherent approach to program design is formulated on the basis that the pedagogic tasks used present appropriate target language forms to learners which are then cognitively processed. As such, task based teaching rejects the notion of comprehensible input**

**per se in favor of input that establishes learner perception of form/function relationships. Group work that is therefore interactive allows for more individualized negotiation of meaning and should be able to adjust input to the comprehension of the group members. Consequently, learners can converse in a less pressured and stressful way which, as Long points out (1989), would not only motivate learners but encourage "shy or linguistically insecure students". Moreover, task and task type, as defined by Long et al aim at something that is done, not something that is said. Krashen's apparent lack of concern for formal accuracy means that although only one particular form is correct, other incorrect forms may be acquired. Acquisition is "done" in Long's terms when the correct form is acquired because this then constitutes second language development. On balance, I would advocate a task based approach that nevertheless includes aspects of the Natural Approach as being most suited to the harnessing of facilitating anxiety to pedagogically productive ends while simultaneously reducing the debilitating anxiety that undermines both cognition and acquisition.**

#### **CLOSING REMARKS**

**In conclusion, it seems fair to say that although there is broad agreement over the types of anxiety that exist, there is no comparable agreement over its causes or whether language anxiety needs to be studied in less generic and more contextually specific terms. The bulk of the research projects undertaken have proceeded along concatenated lines (i.e. a research then theory perspective) which has enabled investigators to study language anxiety as a strain of general anxiety but analyzable in its own context. Freeing the analysis from a priori psychological criteria does not therefore constitute a rejection of psychology but does challenge the belief in clearly observable causal-affective processes. The wide range of anxiety tests have produced differing sets of results but the conclusions that have been drawn cannot be said to be true of other situations where anxiety is a factor in language learning. Individuals may think they know what specifically makes them anxious when studying a foreign language, but as I have suggested, unconscious anxiety manifests itself in ways that may be either beneficial or detrimental. In pedagogic terms, an element of anxiety is to be expected and may be desirable in order to facilitate**

**acquisition and output. Application of gentle pressure in the early stages of learning is preferable to either the cultivation of a stress free environment or a prescriptively didactic teaching method. However, incremental increases in pressure should be applied as the target language becomes more complex. Admittedly, no one method can uniformly and successfully accommodate all learners' needs but the methodological approach that governs Task Based teaching seeks to utilize anxiety as a constant factor in second language acquisition; in other words it attempts to transform a potentially debilitating affective variable into an increasingly facilitating one.**

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