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The Effects of Language Anxiety on Second Language Learners: A Literature Review

Modern language programs in the United States are struggling. A multitude of social and political variables contribute to this decline. One such variable that affects almost every second language learner is language anxiety, a feeling of panic stress that uniquely occurs in the context of the second language acquisition process, especially in a typical classroom setting. The increase in understanding of language acquisition over the last few decades has revealed the significance of language anxiety in this process. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) define language anxiety as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (284). Although a relatively new concept, dozens of studies have been conducted to test the effects of language anxiety.

As an attempt to make sense of this sea of studies, I will present the current research on how language anxiety and affective filters impact second language learning. First, I will discuss the languages that participants of previous studies studied. To give some context for language acquisition, I will discuss the key points of language acquisition that Krashen developed in 1982. Next, I will provide the various findings on the existence and effects of language anxiety. Diving even deeper, I will then discuss the relatively new development of the concept the “affective filter.” Finally, synthesizing all this information, I will suggest how language teachers might apply this to their classes.

Among the groups of language learners that previous literature examined, many were learning English as second language learners. Two of the studies (Alrabai and Moskovsky 2016 and Mehmood 2018) were conducted in Saudi Arabia, so the participants were native Arabic speakers learning English as a foreign language. One group’s participants (Henter 2014) were Romanian native speakers, and the fourth group’s participants (Ni 2012) were Chinese native

speakers. It makes sense that so many people around the world want and have the motivation to learn English since it's such a powerful world language. Interestingly, there were an equal number of studies with French learners. One group of them (Bosmans and Hurd 2016) was comprised of monolingual British participants, two with monolingual Canadian participants (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994 and MacIntyre, Noels, & Clément 1997), and one with bilingual Canadian participants (MacIntyre and Charos 1996). I presume that the number of studies on French acquisition is due to the language divide between monolingual Canada and bilingual Canada. There was just one sole group of participants that were learning Japanese (Liu, Xu, and Wang 2018), and they were native Chinese speakers. Finally, one study (Schinke-Llano and Vicars 1993) evaluated the effects of language anxiety on monolingual American students learning French, Spanish, and/or Italian. This was particularly interesting because the study sought to find out if there were discrepancies among the different languages. Their findings were stable, no matter what language was being studied. However, if the languages had not all been Romance languages, perhaps the results would have differed.

Stephen Krashen contributed considerably to the understanding of second language acquisition, and he was one of the first linguists to consider the effects of language anxiety on language acquisition. In his book, *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, Krashen breaks down his five hypotheses related to second language acquisition: the acquisition-learning distinction, the natural order hypothesis, the Monitor hypothesis, the input hypothesis, and finally, the affective filter hypothesis. Although only the affective filter hypothesis centers around language anxiety, each of the other hypotheses give it a different perspective.

Despite acquisition and learning often being used interchangeably, Krashen distinguishes each of them. Language acquisition is subconscious; therefore, a speaker may not know the rules

of the language, but their instinct leads them in the right direction. Native languages are acquired, as opposed to learned. The process of native language acquisition is natural and does not require much conscious effort. Therefore, this process does not tend to induce stress or anxiety. Krashen mentions that, although significantly more difficult, second languages can be acquired as well. Typically, second language classrooms foster language learning more than language acquisition. The usual memorization drills and repetitive verb conjugations that one imagines when thinking about learning a language do not foster acquisition; rather, they foster language learning. While acquisition is a subconscious process, learning requires a conscious effort to gain knowledge and technical syntactic rules of a second language. This language learning process induces language anxiety more than the acquisition process. Furthermore, despite common belief, learning does not become acquisition. No matter how many times conjugations are drilled, the rules will never be acquired; they may only be learned. Although language learning has its place in supplying the monitor, which will be explained later, or for the purpose of language appreciation, it is not a prerequisite for acquisition. Therefore, the stress of grammatical drills is rarely worth the outcome because it may result in language learning, but not acquisition. Knowing the difference between language learning as a conscious effort and language acquisition as a subconscious process could help relieve some of the stress that second language learners have. However, language learning is not completely invaluable. When language is learned (such as through the grammatical drills mentioned above), it contributes to the learner's monitor, which will be discussed later.

Krashen's second theory, the natural order hypothesis, involves language acquisition. He posits that a predictable order exists in which syntactic rules are acquired. In other words, there is a range from beginner topics to advanced topics that one should follow while acquiring a

language. Krashen illustrates the idea that a second language student should study a grammatical rule slightly more difficult than the rule previously studied with the equation $i + 1$. The “i” stands for input, as in the information being presented to the students. In the equation, it represents the topic that was already studied, so after adding 1 to that, the result is the next topic to study. Ideally, language teachers would follow this order. If advanced topics are introduced too early, students may begin to feel overwhelmed. Unfortunately, this order is unknown, but language teachers may start with simpler topics in order to limit their students’ anxiety.

The next theory that Krashen explains is the monitor hypothesis, which deals with both acquisition and learning. The theory is dependent on the idea that acquisition causes utterances, whereas learning edits them. Speakers use this “monitor” to revise their errors, but it may only be accessed if the speaker has time to reflect, a focus on form, and the knowledge of the rule. Krashen explains that there are three types of monitor-users: the over-user who is so afraid of making an error that they fail to produce language at all, the under-user who likely has not learned the necessary rules of the language, and finally, the optimal user who knows how to use their monitor in a way that doesn’t interfere with their language production. The monitor over-user is a student suffering from language anxiety. They are so anxious about making an error that they refuse to produce any language at all. So, although the monitor may help second language learners, their anxiety levels must be lowered prior to their use of the monitor.

The fourth theory Krashen discusses, the input hypothesis, is based on the idea that speakers seek to communicate, rather than to acquire the grammatical structure of a language. Therefore, language acquisition requires more than just $i+1$; it necessitates effective communication. Language learners must be exposed to simple speech that is roughly tuned to their level and that contains relevant topics. Studying topics that are appropriate for them and

using texts that interest them will help reduce language anxiety. Krashen links this idea with the “silent period” theory. When a language learner is in the beginner stage of acquisition, they may refuse to produce language for a short period of time. However, according to this theory, they are still acquiring language through input, even if they do not produce anything. It’s important not to force students in their silent period to speak because their increased language anxiety levels will harm them more than forced production would help them.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) build off Krashen’s input hypothesis by creating a three-part model that describes the language acquisition process. The three parts are Input, Processing, and Output (283). Input is described practically the same as Krashen described it. While students are in the Input stage, they are being given a stimulus (in the form of the target language), and the initial representation of this information is stored in the memory. At this point in the language acquisition process, anxiety affects “all subsequent stages” (286). In the Processing stage, immediately following the Input stage, the brain organizes, stores, and assimilates the new information (286). Language anxiety derails memorization at this stage. The final stage, Output, is the production of language (287). Stage fright and “freezing” on exams exemplify language anxiety during the Output stage (287). Their study tested the effects of language anxiety, not general anxiety as they explained not all forms of anxiety influence second language learning, on each of these stages. All three stages were found to be negatively impacted by language anxiety. Overall, anxious students had less second language knowledge than non-anxious students, and they had a more difficult time accessing and producing the knowledge they did have.

Soon after Krashen published his account on second language anxiety in 1986, MacIntyre and Gardner collected all relevant articles they could find about the effects of language anxiety on achievement in second language learning to form an annotated bibliography called *The*

Measurement of Anxiety and Applications to Second Language Learning: An Annotated Bibliography (1988). The assembled information validates Krashen's claims about language anxiety. There was widespread agreement that levels of anxiety correlates negatively with second language achievement and performance, especially in the cases of oral production. Many linguists had developed their own scales with which they tested the anxiety levels of the second language learners (such as MacIntyre and Gardner 1994 and Mehmood 2018). These scales not only quantified the severity of a learner's anxiety, but they also served as predictors for a learner's achievement.

Another article written by MacIntyre, but in collaboration with Noels and Clement this time, *Biases in Self-Ratings of Second Language Proficiency: The Role of Language Anxiety* (1997), investigates the relationship between perceived language ability and actual competence, which are both potentially impacted by language anxiety. This study found that learners with low levels of anxiety, likely those that are self-confident, tend to overestimate their level of competence, while learners with high levels of anxiety tend to underestimate it (266). It also validated the claim that language anxiety negatively impacts language proficiency: "as language anxiety scores increase, the ratings of ideas expressed, output quality, and self-rated competence decline" (274). Anxious students were found to express fewer ideas, implying anxiety affects what students say as well as how they say it. This creates a vicious cycle because when a language learner fails to produce language and receive corrections, they are unable to improve.

Bosmans and Hurd (2016) is one of the most recent of those that I reviewed. It focused on the effects of language anxiety on specifically the pronunciation of second language learners in distance learning contexts (in this case, learners that are enrolled in an online language course). Not only is there a lack of research on the effects of language anxiety on pronunciation, but there

is also a lack of instruction of pronunciation in general in foreign language classes (289). As one might expect, they were able to confirm their hypothesis that low levels of language anxiety correlate with high phonological scores (295).

The final hypothesis that Krashen includes is the most relevant to the issue of language anxiety. Although not his own theory (it was produced by Dulay and Burt in 1977), Krashen is often credited for its development. He explains that affective factors, such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety significantly influence language acquisition (31). The “affective filter” refers to the idea that these affective factors, such as language anxiety, can block input, disrupting acquisition. Therefore, if anxiety levels are raised to a certain extent, it may be impossible to acquire language in that moment. A low anxiety environment is more conducive to absorbing comprehensible input.

Many studies of language anxiety adopted the affective filter theory Krashen popularized and applied it to their own research. In Mehmood (2018), the most recent of the articles I reviewed, several aspects related to the affective filter are investigated. Mehmood hypothesized that second language learners adopt high affective filters to filter out the input coming at them, that affective factors such as low self-confidence, low motivation, and high anxiety contribute to a negative self-evaluation and higher affective filters, that there is a direct relationship between classroom environment and the previously mentioned negative self-evaluation, and that a change in the classroom environment can, therefore, change a learner’s self-evaluation. All of these hypotheses were validated through this study. The conclusion advises teachers to be aware of the relationships between their classroom environment and the learners in order to cater to their needs. However, specific pedagogical implications are absent.

Unlike the previous article, Schinke-Llano and Vicars (1993) sought to determine which classroom activities lowered the affective filter the most, which classroom activities allowed for the most negotiated interaction, and if these were the same activities. Their study involved the assessment of two teacher-fronted activities (one with a group response and one with an individual response), one student group problem solving activity, and one dyadic activity with two-way information gap questions. The results of the study were not very conclusive because the various learners ranked all of the activities differently. What the study was able to conclude was that lowered affective filters do not work at cross-purposes with negotiated interaction, but there was also no magnifying effect. For practical usage, they recommended a healthy mix of activities that involve negotiated interaction and activities that foster low affective filters.

While this study failed to discover successful pedagogical tools that could be implemented, Krashen and many others have linked the theories of language anxiety and the affective filter to real life contexts. Krashen (1982) discusses several pedagogical implications of his theories. When discussing the natural order hypothesis, Krashen notes that that students in a given class are often not all on the same level of competency. Notwithstanding, they are often only taught a rule once. Although the natural order is unknown, teachers may help remedy the varying levels of competency through differentiated instruction and scaffolding content.

Krashen's main pedagogical implication focuses on error correction. For example, Krashen ponders whether or not errors should be corrected in the second language learning context. Error correction often causes increased anxiety and affective filters; therefore, error correction could be more detrimental than beneficial to a student's language development. Krashen suggests that error correction should only be used for learning situations, not acquisition situations, and never during free speech. They may be administered for writing and grammatical

tasks; however, he argues that only errors that interfere with communication, occur frequently, or are stigmatized should be corrected. Otherwise, the effects on the learner's anxiety level are not worth it.

Although affective filters will always be at least slightly increased in “artificial linguistic environments,” like the classroom setting, there are pedagogical methods that can be implemented to keep the affective filters as low as possible (Krashen, 162). Krashen himself recommends conversations with native speakers, pleasure reading, and immersion programs. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) asserts that “increased effort can compensate for the effects of anxiety” (300). Language teachers can apply this knowledge by helping their students develop metacognition, an awareness of their own learning. Horwitz and Cope (1986) supports this implication. It explains that teachers may help their students cope with anxiety, or they can try to create a classroom environment that does not foster anxiety (or both). It also concurs with Krashen that moving away from the classroom setting is also beneficial.

These studies have all emphasized the importance of considering affective factors when creating pedagogical theories and solutions. Supportive teachers who acknowledge the feelings of their students can help reduce language anxiety and lower affective filters. In turn, the lower affective filters reduce the negative effects on second language acquisition. Focusing on the students' affective factors not only allows the students to feel more comfortable in their language class, but it also allows language teachers to teach more effectively and language learners to acquire the target language more successfully.

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