

A Psychological Approach to Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Psychology, language and teaching are inextricably intertwined as far as language teaching in particular is concerned. Understanding and application of these three disciplines in language teaching actually has a huge impact on the learners. For a meaningful and successful language teaching, it is better to have a profound understanding of all the three: psychology, language and teaching. The argument of the present research paper is to show that in a second language context like that of India and the whole South Asia, a psychological approach is an urgent requirement at present. Applying psychology in a language class means to be aware of different factors like the role of personality traits, emphatic approach, motivation, consistency, coping with stress and anxiety etc. More importantly, the idea of the paper is that usually the learners in a second/foreign language context get stressed/anxious easily and no effort is made by the teachers to assuage or mitigate this level of stress as a result of which a good learning environment is not created and language learning does not materialise. In majority of these situations, only ten or twenty percent students succeed in breaking the ice and hone their communicative competence while as majority of them remain tongue tied even towards the end of the course. The discredit goes to depressive language teaching environment created by teachers in these classrooms. There is too much anxiety and seriousness in the classrooms which again impede the teaching/learning process. The present paper highlights the impediments like stress and anxiety which obstruct the smooth development of this skill and the role which the teachers can play in keeping these factors under control so that all the students are benefitted in terms of the development of communicative faculty in a second language as it is a quintessential part of one's personality.

Keywords: *Psychology of language learning, Second/Foreign Language, Communicative Competence, Stress, Anxiety*

The three words which stand for three different disciplines like psychology, language and teaching are not just technical ones but they have a thematic link with one another. For a meaningful and successful language teaching, it is better to have a profound understanding of all the three: psychology, language and teaching. Psychology is understandably relevant in all the areas of life but when it comes to teaching and more importantly language teaching, it becomes all the more important. The argument of the present research paper is to show that in a second language context like that of India and the whole South Asia, a psychological approach is present exigency. Applying psychology in a language class means to be aware of

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different factors like the role of personality traits, emphatic approach, motivation, consistency, coping with stress and anxiety etc. More importantly, the idea of the paper is that usually the learners in a second/foreign language context get stressed/anxious easily and no effort is made by the teachers to assuage or mitigate this level of stress as a result of which a good learning environment is not created and language learning does not materialise. In majority of these situations, only ten or twenty percent students succeed in breaking the ice and hone their communicative competence while as majority of them remain tongue tied even towards the end of the course. The discredit goes to depressive language teaching environment created by teachers in these classrooms. There is too much anxiety and seriousness in the classrooms which again impede the teaching/learning process. However, the present paper shall concentrate on impediments like stress and anxiety which hamper/obstruct the smooth development of this skill and the role which the teachers can play in keeping these factors under control so that all the students are benefitted in terms of the development of communicative faculty in a second language as it is of paramount importance in one's personality. The paper shall also offer its own recommendations so as to improve the lot of language classrooms.

Today, it is an established fact that there is huge variation in the quality of education as some children (from well of families) have a privileged access to language while as many children (from poor financial background) suffer from acute language deprivation or what could also be called language malnutrition. As has already been mentioned above that the present research paper shall concentrate only on psychological factors like anxiety and stress. Thus it becomes imperative to understand what we mean by these two terms. It is true, that we are one way or the other familiar with these two terms as we use them in day to day life but the urgent requirement of the day, for a language teacher in particular, is to understand the implications of these terms. The term stress is purely a subjective phenomenon and cannot be compartmentalised in a single definition. It was first used by Hans Selye in 1936 and is defined as the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change. He is of the opinion that stress is both good and bad. He argues that increased stress results in increased productivity – up to a point, after which things go rapidly downhill. While defining stress, it must be kept in mind that it is essentially of two types; good stress and bad stress. Good stress is known as eustress and bad stress is also known as distress. As far as bad stress is concerned it is caused by some stressor, that is, a factor which has the capacity to cause stress. What we call anxiety is the immediate outcome of stressor as it continues after the stressor is gone. It can either come from a situation or a thought that usually develops a feeling of frustration, anger, nervousness or anxiety. In short, anxiety and stress are closely related.

To further elaborate upon anxiety, it is an emotion dominated by an unpleasant state of mind due to inner turmoil. It is often followed by nervous behaviour like pacing back and forth, somatic complaints and deep thinking. It can also be called a feeling of uneasiness or worry due to generalisation and overreaction to a particular situation which only seems to be subjectively threatening but may not be so actually. The immediate side effects of it are muscular tension, restlessness, fatigue and problems in concentration. If somebody is experiencing anxiety regularly he or she may be suffering from anxiety disorder. In the field of education in general and language learning in particular, it has been noticed that anxiety interferes with many types of learning and most importantly when it comes a second or foreign language situation, it has been described as second/foreign language anxiety. D. J. Young calls this anxiety a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. McIntyre & Gardner

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define this anxiety as it as “a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system” (Pp 283-305).

From the traditional point of view, anxiety has been divided into three types-trait anxiety, situational anxiety, and state anxiety. Trait anxiety has been defined as related to a generally stable predisposition to be nervous in a wide range of situations on one end, state anxiety is a moment-to-moment experience of transient emotional state on the other while as situational anxiety falls in the middle of the continuum, representing the probability of becoming anxious in a particular type of situation. In this connection, MacIntyre (1998) observes that language anxiety is a form of situation-specific anxiety, and research on language anxiety should employ measures of anxiety experienced in particular second/foreign language contexts. He conceived of language anxiety as “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language” (Pp 27). Similarly, Horwitz and Cope (1991) conceptualized foreign language anxiety as a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Pp 31).

DISCUSSION

It is important to understand that a detailed investigation/understanding of these factors could potentially assist language teachers to mitigate or lessen anxiety in the classroom setting and to make the classroom environment stress free and anxiety-free so as to improve learners' performance in the target language in the best possible way. It was only in the late twentieth century, in the 1970s, that the SLA researchers began to study the significant role played by personality and motivational variables in second language acquisition. They posited that, in order to gain a holistic understanding of this process, learners' affective variables need to be taken into account to cater to their needs and interests. Among these affective variables, learner anxiety has come to be recognized as an important area of study in second language acquisition because of the negative influence it can have on students' performance. Some researchers reported a negative relationship between language anxiety and achievement, e.g. the higher the anxiety, the lower the performance, (Hashemi 640-46). Others reported no relationship, or a positive relationship (ibid). More recently, Horwitz (2001) has reiterated that the issue of understanding the relationship between anxiety and achievement is unresolved. The reason for these mixed results is perhaps, as stated by Philip that “a comparison of the experimental research examining the relationship between anxiety and second language learning is, to a degree, perplexing, presenting some conflicting evidence and illustrating that anxiety is a complex, multi-faceted construct”(Hashemi 640-46). In addition to the negative effects of anxiety on language learning and performance, anxiety has occasionally been found to facilitate language learning. Anxiety, in its debilitating and facilitating forms, serves simultaneously to motivate and to warn the learner. Facilitating anxiety “motivates the learner to “fight” the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approach behaviour” (Scovel 15-23). Debilitating anxiety, in contrast, “motivates the learner to “flee” the new learning task; it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behaviour” (ibid). Learners' anxiety while speaking an L2/FL is manifested in a variety of different ways, which sends some signals for the interlocutors to identify the anxiety-related behaviours. The obvious signs of anxious students described by the participants were blushing, rubbing the palms, perspiration, staggered voice, reluctance, poor performance in spoken activities, less enthusiasm or willingness to speak, less interpretativeness, less eye-contact, reading from the script while giving presentation, either too fast or too slow speed of speech, etc. Furthermore, some learners stated that they try to avoid the situation that appears to be anxiety evoking. These results seem to indicate that

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language teachers can accurately and credibly decode the symptoms of anxious behaviour in the language class and can deal with them accordingly.

Reasons for anxiety

1. Since language anxiety is a psychological construct which stems from the learner's own self, his self perceptions, perceptions about others, perceptions about the target language communication situations and above all his beliefs about L2/FL learning.
2. Within social contexts, language anxiety may be experienced due to extrinsic motivators like different social and cultural environments, particularly the environments where L1 and L2/FL learning takes place.
3. There is a predisposition among some people to experience such anxiety because of their own concerns about ethnicity, foreignness and stereotype threat.
4. Social status of the speaker and the interlocutor, a sense of power relations between them, and gender could also be important factors in causing language anxiety for L2/FL speakers. In Asian context, it is not only social status but caste factor also which can give rise to a feeling of low self esteem.
5. Adopting or achieving native (L1)-like pronunciation emerged as a big source of anxiety for language learners.
6. Strict and formal classroom environment as a significant cause of their language anxiety.
7. Language teachers do not go down to the level of learners in the classroom.
8. Language teachers speak so fast in the class that students are discouraged instead of getting encouraged.
9. Language teachers speak well but do not make any effort to hone the skill of students. Instead they improve upon their own skills.
10. They reduce teaching of English to a subject and not a skill.
11. For many language learners formal language classroom setting is a major source of stress and anxiety because of its demand to be more correct and clearer in using the target language.
12. According to participants of the study the more friendly and informal the language classroom environment, the less it is likely to be anxiety/stress provoking. So learners feel more anxious and under stress in the classroom environments that follow the traditional learning systems where the learners have to constantly drill or repeat some tiresome tasks like machines (e.g. audio-lingual language teaching method). As against this, language learners reported to be less anxious and stressful in environments that emphasize collaborative activities among the teachers and the students.
13. Differences in cultures are also reported to have contributed to anxiety. The more familiar the culture the less anxiety is there and the less familiar the culture the more anxiety is there. The use of the term 'losing face', by the participant supports Jones' (2004) view that language anxiety is a concern of face in different cultures (Hashemi 640-646)
14. Observations of many language teachers have noticed that speakers' sense of inferiority complex while talking to someone higher in status may cause stress or anxiety for them. Sometimes even an unequal status between students and teachers can also be a source of anxiety for the students.

DISCUSSION

Keeping in view these sensitivities of students it becomes important to know the role of language teachers in assuaging stress and anxiety among students so that they find themselves in a positive and congenial environment to learn language effectively, thus

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leaving no scope for depressive thoughts like anxiety and not getting bogged down by stress. First of all, identification of anxiety producing factors and recognising learner manifestations of it and then the remedial measures to be taken for the same becomes important. The research conducted so far in this direction suggests a variety of strategies to cope with language anxiety and stress in classroom settings. In general, the remediation of such anxiety has focused on cognitive, affective, and behavioural approaches. The **Cognitive Approach** in psychology is a relatively modern approach to human behaviour that focuses on how we think, with the belief that such thought processes affect the way in which we behave. This approach holds that the thinking disturbances that occur in the classroom are the primary sources of anxiety. Accordingly the researchers in this field recommend a 'cognitive modification (CM)' method for its treatment which focuses on changing the students' own cognitive appraisals. Students are encouraged to develop more positive and facilitating self-talk and are taught to manage their self-evaluation more realistically. The affective approach/method is the emotional expression of the caregiver. The starting point is in being aware of the emotional and cognitive functioning of the special person of the caregiver at the same moment. The method clarifies how the emotions and cognitions of the caregiver are interrelated with those of the special person. This approach attempts to change the negative involuntary association between the classroom and anxiety, and assumes that emotional arousal (physiological responsiveness) is the main concern (Hashemi 640-46). Researchers suggest taking steps to control bodily reactions and stress in order to alleviate anxiety and recommend systematic desensitization therapy (SDT) as a treatment method. The students are taught how to relax in the presence of the anxiety stimuli and, thus, the anxiety is reduced in the subsequent oral communication situations (Hashemi 640-46). Behaviourism views development as a continuous process in which children play a relatively passive role. It is also a general approach that is used in a variety of settings including both clinical and educational. The adherents of the behavioural approach presume that poor academic skills are the main source of anxiety. And as far as its treatment is concerned, the experts/researchers prescribe skills training (ST) method where the students are taught the behavioural skills required for success in particular oral communication context. Research on language anxiety suggests a variety of techniques to reduce or successfully cope with language anxiety. Foss and Reitzel hold that the recognition of students' irrational beliefs or fears and their unrealistic expectations can help students interpret anxiety-producing situations more realistically and adopt an approach rather than 'avoiding behaviour'(Hashemi 640-46). They recommend verbalization or articulation of any fears as a strategy to cope with language anxiety.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is important to understand that the best judge of the classroom situation is the teacher as he/she knows the problems/weaknesses of the students and accordingly he/she can chalk out a strategy based on cognitive, affective or behavioural approach or he/she can also merge things from all of them for the best interests of students. All the above mentioned approaches are useful and effective but at the end of the day, the classroom situation/context will determine the approach that the teacher is likely to adopt. In short, so as to achieve the desired goals to the maximum the teacher should bear in mind the following recommendations.

Recommendations

1. To start the lecture with an anecdote or motivational quote or proverb which has the capacity to boost the confidence level of students and which wakes them from their slumber.

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2. To ensure that they create a student friendly environment in the classroom as it has been observed in many language classrooms that students' embarrassment may be aggravated by the role played by language instructors in the class.
3. To ensure that they go to the classroom with a positive attitude. The teachers' attitude towards and beliefs about language learning and teaching, their reaction to the learners' errors, and the way they create stressful environment in the class have been reported to be significantly related to second/foreign language anxiety.
4. Many language learners think that the authoritative, embarrassing and humiliating attitude of the teachers towards students, particularly when they make mistakes, can have severe consequences on learners' cognition and their willingness to communicate in the class. A learner's mistake may bring about humiliating punishment from the teacher under the concentrated gaze of one's peers.
5. Language teachers should come out of their denial mode as far as stress is concerned. They must not underestimate stress as it is an established fact that many people in the world have died due to stress and those who have survived emerged as strong leaders. As Nietzsche says it rightly "What does not kill you makes you stronger." Accordingly they must ensure that they keep bad stress or distress in students under control and exploit eustress for their benefit and make them conscious of its advantages.
6. Since the traditional methods and approaches like grammar translation method and direct method are found irrelevant in these situations, hence a purely communicative approach should be exploited as this approach gives them a chance to practice the speaking skills more and more.
7. It is imperative for teachers to an amiable and amicable environment characterised by camaraderie and informality as the best in them can be extracted only in this environment. An utmost care should also be exercised against designating students as average, below average, above average, good, excellent etc as these adjectives can lead to discrimination and a sense of inferiority and superiority. They must feel that they are all same with common human weaknesses and limitations alongwith their teacher.
8. Experts have divided students into two categories; those who take risks and those who avoid taking them. It is here that the teacher can identify the learners who are afraid of taking risks and help them understand that there is no short cut to learning and that errors are the stepping stones to success and not impediments. Initially they may face problems but with the passage of time the going will surely become smoother.
9. FEAR can mean either 'forget everything or run' or 'face everything and rise'. The distance between the two cannot be easily bridged as it is a time taking process. The teacher should therefore give them a live demonstration of both these categories of learners along with their advantages and disadvantages. In this way the teacher can reduce their fear by giving them feedback again and again till they plug all their loopholes.
10. The major fallacy in many language classrooms has been to create a feeling of competition among learners as it often waters the feelings of ill will, hatred, jealousy and spite. Instead the teacher should tell them in clear terms they are in competition with themselves, with their past as they were only good/average and so on in the past, now they have to become better or best. This will not only help them grow individually but also unify them and collaborate with one another to materialise their goals.

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Besides the above recommendations, Hashmi et al, also offer some recommendations, although in their own contexts, yet, however, are relevant to our situation also. Their recommendations are:

1. To give language learners a feeling of success and satisfaction when using English, language teachers should avoid activities that enhance early frustration. They can instead start with simple step by step lessons so that learners can feel satisfied and relaxed when participate in language classes for the first time (Hashemi 640-646)
2. It is also recommended that teachers should confront students' erroneous and irrational beliefs by cultivating in them "reasonable commitments for successful language learning" (Onwuegbuzie 217-39). More importantly, students should be guided as to how to direct their attention away from self-centred worries when they are speaking a second/foreign language (ibid).
3. Familiarity with the culture and ethnic background of the language learners and an
4. awareness of their previous language learning experiences can also assist language teachers to understand and decode anxiety related behaviours in some learners. (ibid)
5. Finally, language teachers need some specific in service training courses on general
6. psychology including language anxiety in order to deal with the stress and anxiety in their classes (ibid)

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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