

Strategies for coping with language anxiety: the case of students of English in Japan

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This study was designed to develop a typology of strategies that students use to cope with the anxiety they experience in English language classrooms. The influence of anxiety level on strategy use was also assessed. Findings suggested 70 basic tactics for coping with language anxiety that cohered into five strategy categories: Preparation (e.g. studying hard, trying to obtain good summaries of lecture notes), Relaxation (e.g. taking a deep breath, trying to calm down), Positive Thinking (e.g. imagining oneself giving a great performance, trying to enjoy the tension), Peer Seeking (e.g. looking for others who are having difficulty controlling their anxiety, asking other students if they understand the class), and Resignation (e.g. giving up, sleeping in class). Cognitive, affective, and behavioral strategy types were evident. No significant relationship was found between language anxiety and frequencies of strategy use, suggesting the need for future research on how effectively the observed strategies may be implemented.

Introduction

Language anxiety is conceptualized as a situation-specific personality trait having two psychological components: emotional arousal and negative self-related cognition (MacIntyre 1995: 91). These components ostensibly interfere with behavior instrumental to language learning, and are more intense in people who are dispositionally high in language anxiety. Because language anxiety is consistently associated with problems in language learning such as deficits in listening comprehension, reduced word production, impaired vocabulary learning, lower grades in language courses, and lower scores on standardized tests (Horwitz and Young 1991), understanding the mechanism of anxiety in language learning has been of major concern to educators and researchers (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994: 2).

The effects of language anxiety

In general, the effects of language anxiety have been explained with reference to the cognitive consequences of anxiety arousal (ibid.). When an individual becomes anxious in any setting, negative self-related cognition begins. Once present, it consumes cognitive resources that might otherwise be applied to the task at hand. This can create additional difficulties in cognitive processing because there are fewer resources

available, possibly leading to failure, more negative cognitions that consume more resources, and so on.

The question of what students are actually doing to cope with their anxiety in language classrooms has received hardly any attention, nor has the possibility been considered that such coping behaviors may play a role in the customary decrease in the performance of highly language-anxious students. For many students, language courses are the most anxiety-provoking courses they take (MacIntyre 1995: 90). Campbell and Ortiz (1991: 159) estimated that up to one half of all language students experience debilitating levels of language anxiety. When people are confronted with a situation that they think will make them anxious, the most expected response is to avoid the situation and thus avoid the discomfort. However, in most language classrooms, avoidance is not a viable option; they are expected to find some way to cope with the anxiety.

Approaches to helping students to cope

Despite the absence of direct empirical work that deals with strategies that students use to deal with their language anxiety, extensive research has been done on how to help students cope with their anxiety in academic settings. In general, the remediation of such anxiety has focused on cognitive, affective, and behavioral approaches (Hembree 1988: 67).

Those who take a cognitive approach assume that thinking disturbances that occur in the classroom are the primary sources of anxiety. Interventions from this perspective include rational-emotive therapy and cognitive restructuring. The affective approach attempts to change the negative involuntary association between the classroom and anxiety. Therapies from this perspective include systematic desensitization, relaxation training, and biofeedback training. The behavioral approach presumes that anxiety occurs because of poor academic skills. Accordingly, training people in study skills is assumed to end the anxiety.

These three intervention approaches provide the basis for considering the types of strategies that students use to cope with their language anxiety. If they think that their cognition (worry, preoccupations, and concerns) creates the anxiety, they may attempt to suppress or alter the thought processes related to language learning. Those who believe that emotional arousal (physiological responsiveness) is the primary concern may take steps to alleviate bodily reactions and tension. If students presume that anxiety occurs because they lack the requisite skills, they may study harder. There may also be a degree of resignation; if students perceive that their anxiety is too much to cope with, they may not invest enough effort to reduce the anxiety.

A recent study by Kondo (1997) indirectly supports this analysis. He developed a typology of strategies that students reported using to cope with their anxiety in exam situations, and found that coping strategies were subsumed into the four basic methods just described: cognitive, affective, and behavioral methods, as well as resignation.

The discussion thus far can be summarized in the following research hypothesis: the use of cognitive, affective, and behavioral strategies as

well as resignation characterizes students' anxiety coping behaviors in language classrooms.

Individual variation among students

In addition to a global examination of the repertoire of strategies for coping with language anxiety, it is also important to consider possible differences in the number and the types of reported strategies as a function of students' levels of anxiety. With respect to this point, Kondo (ibid. 210) reported that in exam settings students with high anxiety were more likely to report behavioral strategies than those with low anxiety. However, it is difficult to predict if this finding will generalize to language classrooms. Although test anxiety and language anxiety would appear to involve similar components of negative cognition and emotional arousal, test-taking has different situational characteristics from language learning. Because of the difficulty in predicting how these differences in situational features will influence the use of anxiety coping strategies, the following research question is advanced: do students with high language anxiety differ in the number and the types of anxiety coping strategies from those with low anxiety?

Background to this study

The present investigation deals with the case of students of English in Japan. It should be noted that we do not intend to emphasize the difference between students in Japan and those in other countries. Rather, it is hoped that this study will add more empirical data to the study of anxiety in language learners, including those in Japan.

This study is composed of three distinct data gathering and analysis phases. The purpose of the first phase is to measure the respondents' levels of language anxiety, and to collect a broad sample of tactics that they use to cope with language anxiety. The second phase is designed to classify the tactics into strategies on the basis of similarity, and the third phase assesses the strategies for possible differences by respondents' levels of language anxiety.

Method Phase 1

The participants were 93 women and 116 men ($N=209$) enrolled in basic English courses at two universities in Central Japan. These courses are general university requirements and enroll students from across the universities. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 37 with a mean of 21.1 years. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were gathered during regular class meetings.

Initially, participants completed the measure of language anxiety, Kondo's English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELCAS; Kondo 2002). The scale consists of eighteen Likert-type items assessing self-reported anxiety in English language classrooms. Examples of the items include 'I worry about whether I can keep up with the other students', 'I worry about whether the other students think I am poor at English', and 'I get nervous when I speak English in front of the other students'. Higher scores reflect greater language anxiety. The scale has demonstrated internal consistency of .92, and test-retest reliability for an interval of eight weeks of .85 (ibid. 2002). For the present study, the alpha coefficient was .90.

One week after completing the ELCAS, the respondents were given an open-ended questionnaire and asked to describe specific tactics that they had used to cope with their anxiety associated with language learning in English language classrooms. They were encouraged to report any tactic used from junior high school to college. The goal was to identify as many different tactics as possible with this procedure. Throughout the procedure, the respondents were allowed to request clarification on any issue they did not fully understand. No respondent indicated being confused by the instructions. Of 209 respondents who completed the ELCAS, seven failed to participate in this procedure, resulting in their ELCAS scores being deleted from any further analysis.

Each of the written reports by the respondents was subsequently read by both of the investigators in order to construct a list of all tactics that the students reported using. A tactic was defined as a report of a mental maneuver or an observable behavior undertaken by the respondent for the purpose of coping with language anxiety. Rater-rater agreement on this task (Scott's P_i) was .94, and the judges conferred to resolve cases of disagreement. A total of 373 tactics were initially identified, and elimination of duplicate tactics (defined as nearly identical in wording) reduced the set of tactics to 70. The listing of all 70 tactics is reported in the Appendix.

Phase 2

Each of the 70 tactics identified in Phase 1 was recorded on a separate index card and assembled in random order into a set for presentation to an additional 60 undergraduate students selected from different classes from those in the previous phase. Each participant was asked to sort the cards into piles. The participants were told that (a) the piles were to consist of similar tactics, (b) no pile could consist of only one tactic, (c) they were free to create any number of piles, and (d) each pile should be provided with a short explanation of its content.

The sorted data were converted into a 70×70 lower-triangle co-occurrence matrix in which cells represented the proportion of participants who grouped a given pair of tactics into the same category. The similarity data were submitted to cluster analysis in order to determine those tactics that cohere into strategies for coping with language anxiety.

Phase 3

The types of strategies that emerged from Phase 2 of the study were assessed for possible differences by the respondents' levels of language anxiety measured in Phase 1, using a series of correlational analyses.

Results

Phase 1

The mean ELCAS score in the present sample was 66.71 ($SD=15.79$), a value that is consistent with the normative data presented by Kondo (2002).

Phase 2

An agglomerative, hierarchical cluster analysis based on the method of the average linkage between groups was employed as a means of identifying the composition of strategies for coping with language anxiety. The rate of change in the agglomeration coefficients suggested that the major change occurred in going from six to five clusters. The

listing of 70 basic tactics organized by this five-cluster solution appears in the Appendix.

Five strategies

The first category, Preparation, refers to attempts at controlling the impending threat by improving learning and study strategies (e.g. studying hard, trying to obtain good summaries of lecture notes). Use of these strategies would be expected to increase students' subjectively estimated mastery of the subject matter, and hence reduce the anxiety associated with the language class.

The second category, Relaxation, involves tactics that aim at reducing somatic anxiety symptoms. Typical items are 'I take a deep breath' and 'I try to calm down'.

The third strategy set, Positive Thinking, is characterized by its palliative function of suppressing problematic cognitive processes that underlie students' anxiety (e.g. imagining oneself giving a great performance, trying to enjoy the tension). These strategies are intended to divert attention from the stressful situation to positive and pleasant cues, and bring relief to the anxious student.

The fourth category, Peer Seeking, is distinguished by students' willingness to look for other students who seem to have trouble understanding the class and/or controlling their anxiety. For the anxious student, the realization that others are having the same problem may serve as a source of emotional regulation by social comparison.

The final strategy set was labeled Resignation. This category is characterized by students' reluctance to do anything to alleviate their language anxiety (e.g. giving up, sleeping in class). Students reporting examples of Resignation seem intent on minimizing the impact of anxiety by refusing to face the problem.

Phase 3

The apportionment of respondents who reported at least one tactic in each of the five strategy clusters was as follows: Preparation, 60.4%; Relaxation, 11.9%; Positive Thinking, 26.2%; Peer Seeking, 11.4%; and Resignation, 28.2%. The percentages don't add up to 100 because respondents could report multiple strategies.

To investigate the relationship between language anxiety and the use of anxiety coping strategies, Pearson correlations were computed between ELCAS scores and frequencies of each strategy. The results revealed that none of these correlations were statistically significant (ELCAS and Preparation, .10; Relaxation, -.03; Positive Thinking, .06; Peer Seeking, -.02; and Resignation, -.08).

Discussion

One goal of this investigation was to develop a typology of strategies that students use to cope with language anxiety. Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, we identified 70 basic tactics for reducing language anxiety that cohered into five strategy types (Preparation, Relaxation, Positive Thinking, Peer Seeking, and Resignation). These results lend support to our hypothesis that the use of cognitive, affective, and behavioral coping strategies, as well as

resignation, characterizes the behaviors of anxious students in the language classroom. Positive Thinking and Peer Seeking are attempts to suppress or alter problematic thought processes related to language learning, and thus can be subsumed into cognitive strategies. Relaxation is characterized by its affective quality in that it aims at alleviating bodily tension associated with emotional arousal, and Preparation can be considered a behavioral strategy because it focuses on behavioral components of language learning that are related to effective performance in class. The five strategies identified in the present investigation are quite similar to those observed in test-taking situations (Kondo 1997: 208). It would appear that anxiety coping behaviors generalize across different evaluational situations.

Turning to the question of strategy-use differences as a function of anxiety level, no significant correlations were found between ELCAS scores and frequencies of the five strategies. It seems that even low language-anxious students try a variety of strategies to reduce what little anxiety they experience. Considering the adverse effects that anxiety has on language learning, in addition to the fact that anxiety itself is an unpleasant experience, it is reasonable to assume that most students, irrespective of their anxiety level, will want to minimize its impact. The question, then, should not be whether students use certain coping strategies, but how effectively these strategies may be used.

We may speculate that students with low language anxiety will be more successful in their use of coping strategies, but there is no empirical evidence to verify such a claim. Further investigation of this issue would advance our understanding of how people function in stressful situations.

It is interesting to note that Preparation was reported to be used more frequently than any other strategy. On the surface, this finding seems to contradict those in much of the existing research; although there is considerable evidence that anxious people experience relatively high levels of task-irrelevant thoughts in evaluational settings (Zeidner 1998: 66), Preparation, which is obviously task-relevant in nature, was found to be used by students with high anxiety as frequently as by those with low anxiety.

This contradiction may be accounted for in the following way. When students are motivated to reduce their anxiety, they are assumed to adopt those strategies they perceive to be most effective. According to Zeidner (*ibid.* 320), active coping, or problem-focused coping, is generally more effective than either emotion-focused or avoidance-oriented coping in stress reduction, and is preferred by most people. Congruence between active coping and Preparation is obvious; both provide a sense of mastery over the source of the stress, divert attention from the problem, and discharge energy following exposure to threat.

We may, therefore, reasonably conclude that the use of Preparation by anxious students does not necessarily suggest the absence of task-irrelevant thoughts. It is more likely that they had to use these task-oriented behaviors as strategies to suppress thoughts about such off-task

matters as worry about poor performance and the loss of regard by others.

To summarize, this analysis has demonstrated that students' anxiety coping behaviors in the language classroom are characterized by the use of cognitive, affective, and behavioral strategies as well as resignation. We have also shown that no significant relationship was found between language anxiety and frequencies of strategy use. Future research on the present topic should consider the interaction between anxiety-coping strategies and characteristics of the language classroom. In the current study, an anxiety-coping strategy was conceptualized as a one-shot, single-act phenomenon. In reality, however, the use of cognitive, affective, and behavioral strategies probably shifts according to the demands of the situation. To fully understand the anxiety coping mechanisms evoked in the language classroom, acts of anxiety coping should be examined in relation to their influence on the situation, as well as to the situational influence on them. Further investigation of this issue would enhance the exploration of the coping process during stressful encounters.

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Tactics for Coping with Language Anxiety Organized by a Five-Cluster Solution

I Preparation

I try to get used to using English. I study hard. I prepare myself better. I peruse the material before I am called on by the teacher. I ask for help from friends. I check my dictionary. I ask the teacher some questions. I practice English in my mind. I think carefully about where I am having trouble. I concentrate on the class. I listen carefully to what my classmates say in class. I try to perform my best. I try to read carefully. I ask the teacher to speak more slowly. I try to guess the meaning of a difficult passage. I try to make a habit of studying English every day. I try to obtain good summaries of lecture notes.

II Relaxation

I take a deep breath. I try to relax. I try to calm down. I close my eyes. I pretend to be calm. I shake my body. I touch my hair. I play with my hands. I look at my watch. I write “people” on my palm and swallow it.

III Positive Thinking

I try to be confident. I tell myself that English is not so important. I try to think positively. I tell myself that I’m OK. I try not to think of people around me. I believe in myself. I try to enjoy the tension. I think of my favorite song. I cheer myself up. I imagine myself giving a great performance. I tell myself that I can do it. I tell myself that I am better than the others. I try to take it easy. I try not to take it seriously. I use the anxiety to motivate myself. I just try to be myself. I tell myself that I’m not anxious. I say a prayer. I try not to think of the consequences. I tell myself that my answer is correct. I tell myself that it’s OK to make mistakes. I tell myself that mistakes are good because I can learn from them. I tell myself that even if I am poor at English, I am good at other subjects. I try to enjoy English. I think of something pleasant. I think of a joke. I think of something else. I tell myself to study harder for the next class.

IV Peer Seeking

I tell myself that difficult problems for me are also difficult for the others. I tell myself that the others must also be anxious. I look for others who are having difficulty understanding the class. I look for others who are having difficulty controlling their anxiety. I ask students around me if they understand the class. I talk with friends around me. I look around. I deliberately perform poorly.

V Resignation

I give up. I don’t make useless resistance. I accept the situation. I just try to put up with the situation. I sleep in class. I stop paying attention.