Language Anxiety in International Students: How can it be overcome?

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Abstract

The ability to communicate in more than one language is widely recognized as a desirable skill, whether to further a career or merely for personal use. Consequently thousands worldwide study second languages, however many factors hinder the learner’s progress and level of proficiency in their target language. This study explores language anxiety, which has shown to have a substantially negative impact on performance. This paper argues that while it has been widely studied, the focus of the vast majority of studies are classroom-based and focus on the instructors’ role in lowering students’ anxiety. This study focuses on a largely uninvestigated aspect of language anxiety: how students can reduce their anxiety outside the classroom in a target-language speaking environment without instructors’ intervention. It looks at a group of five Chinese students of English, assesses their levels of anxiety upon entering Australia, asks whether or not this has changed over time, and investigates whether there were any strategies they employed which helped to alleviate the initial anxiety they felt when speaking to native speakers of English. The findings indicate that forming friendships helps to diminish the stress experienced by second language students outside the language classroom, because between friends, the fear of negative evaluation is reduced and the level of confidence increased.

1. Introduction

“You just have to open your mouth and start speaking.”

How often do language learners hear this said about speaking in a second language? “You just have to do it.” However, for many learners there is a genuine fear of performing in the second language, a phenomenon known as (foreign or second) language anxiety, which can be an enormous hurdle for learners. As one of the participants in this study explained, “I don’t know how to not be nervous when speak to native speakers. I tried to force myself in a native English speaking environment, but failed. I don’t have the courage.”

With immigration, opportunities to study and travel overseas, and the increased importance of political and economic alliances between nations, the ability to communicate with cultures other then one’s own is an extremely important skill. Communication is defined as succeeding “in conveying information, evoking understanding” (The Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary, 2005). As humans, our primary medium for communicating with each other is language. Mutual understanding is impossible when parties do not speak the same language; therefore learning the language of the culture in which you wish to communicate is vital. For this reason, whether for personal interest or in order to further a career, thousands worldwide are currently studying a second language. However as numerous studies, language teachers and researchers have shown, this is no simple task. There are many issues involved with learning a language, such as motivation, age, aptitude,
attitude, personality, learning styles and affective factors. One particular area addressed by many researchers (MacIntyre 1995; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope 1986; Young 1991; Sparks & Ganschow 1995; and Aida 1994), falls under the umbrella of affective factors or how the learner feels emotionally towards the language (Scovel 1991:16). This area is language anxiety. It is an important area of research firstly because the research suggests that “anxiety... may affect the quality of an individual’s communication or willingness to communicate” (Young 1991:58), but also because it affects a large number of students in higher institutions (Campbell & Ortiz 1991:159).

This paper will firstly outline language anxiety as defined in the literature, plus how and why it affects performance. Secondly it will discuss the focus of the literature thus far and explain how the current study ties into this research. Thirdly, the study conducted will be discussed in terms of the method, participants and results. It will conclude by stating the study’s indication that forming friendships helps to alleviate some of the stress experienced by second language students outside the language classroom, because between friends, the fear of negative evaluation is reduced and the level of confidence increased.

2. Literature Review

2.1 What is language Anxiety?

“Anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (Horwitz 2001:113). Anxiety has been found to interfere with many types of learning and it is only logical that this would also apply to second language learning (Horwitz 2001:113). In 1994, Gardner and MacIntyre defined language anxiety as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning”(Onwuegbuzie, Bailey & Daly 1999:218). This definition appears to be widely accepted by researchers.

2.2 A brief history of the research: anxiety as facilitating or debilitating

Scholars, teachers and students alike have long considered the probability that anxiety has an effect on language learning and performance (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986:1) but there was disagreement as to whether anxiety helped or hindered it (MacIntyre 1995:90). In 1977, Kleinmann split anxiety into two separate constructs, facilitating and debilitating anxiety (Scovel 1991:18), with the former an asset to performance and debilitating anxiety detrimental to performance (MacIntyre & Gardner 1991:41). However, the earliest studies of this construct produced mixed and often confusing results (Scovel 1991:17; Aida 1994:156).

In 1986, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope introduced a new system for measuring students’ anxiety. They called this test the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which consisted of a 33-item, five-point Likert scale survey (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986:129). With the help of this scale, the findings in this area have been fairly uniform (Horwitz 2001:114). Researchers have come to the conclusion that a little anxiety can be motivating and beneficial in language learning, however once
it passes a certain point it seriously impinges on the learner’s ability to focus, resulting in poorer performance (Crookall & Oxford 1991:141).

This assertion that it is largely debilitating has been corroborated by many studies. “Significant negative correlations between language anxiety and course grades have been reported for languages such as Japanese, Spanish and French” (MacIntyre 1995:91). Other studies have also shown that students with high levels of debilitating anxiety tend to avoid trying to produce complex or personal messages in the target language (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986:126). Thus, they prevent their interlanguage from growing more complex and elaborate, stunting their language acquisition and preventing their performance from improving. Therefore the phenomenon is now seen largely as detrimental rather than facilitating to language learning.

2.3 Attention, Self-perception, and Language Anxiety

One possible reason for the negative effect on performance has been proposed by MacIntyre, Noels and Clément (1997:269):

Anxious learners may focus their attention on their perceived inadequacies, the potential for failure, and the consequences of that imagined failure, rather than concentrating on the task itself. As a result, because they divide their mental resources and apply themselves less well to the task at hand, their performance on the task suffers.

The cognitive component of anxiety was identified by Liebert and Morris (quoted in MacIntyre 1995:91) as ‘worry’, which consists of “distressing preoccupations and concerns about impending events.” If students are worried about performing in the second language, it means their processing capacity for the second language is greatly reduced, having a severely negative impact on performance.

What is the focus of this worry? Often it centers around another form of anxiety called fear of negative evaluation, which Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) identified as an anxiety which relates closely to language anxiety. Defined as “apprehension about others’ evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively,” fear of negative evaluation greatly contributes to the worry students experience when trying to communicate in the target language.

Adults typically perceive themselves as reasonably intelligent, socially-adept individuals. These assumptions are rarely challenged in the native language; ... however, the situation when learning a foreign language stands in marked contrast... Because complex and non-spontaneous mental operations are required in order to communicate [in the target language] at all, any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual’s self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986: 128).

Self-perception plays a key role in students’ approaches to learning and use of a second language (Foss & Reitzel 1991:131). Elevating an individual’s self-perception and self-confidence is extremely important if they are to be expected to initiate
conversation, thereby practicing and improving their language and becoming more effective communicators. Hence many studies have been conducted investigating how students’ anxiety can be reduced.

2.4 Focus of the research to date
An examination of the current literature on language anxiety reveals that the majority of the studies have been classroom-based, focusing on the relationship between language anxiety and interactions between the students and the teacher (Arnold & Brown 1999:65). They examine the ways in which teachers can reduce students’ language anxiety in the classroom so that the student can learn more effectively. The FLCAS proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) is an extremely popular scale for measuring anxiety. Its name of course indicates that the focus is on language anxiety inside the classroom and the accompanying discussion focuses in part on pedagogic implications. The research in this area seems to have remained focused on this particular angle of study. Studies by Aida (1994); MacIntyre and Gardner (1991); Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986); Koch and Terrell (1991); and Price (1991) stress the importance of the teacher’s role and what can be done to minimize language anxiety in the classroom, with the overall conclusion being that it is the responsibility of the instructor.

An important study to mention in further detail was conducted by Price (1991). She interviewed highly anxious students and finished by asking them if they had any ideas as to how language classes could be made less stressful (Price 1991:106). A frequently made observation by the students was that it would be less intimidating if the instructor was more friendly and encouraging, rather than an authority figure (Price 1991:107). Further to this, the role of friendship will be discussed in a subsequent section.

This notion of its being primarily the instructor’s responsibility to lower students’ anxiety in the classroom is intuitively reasonable, considering that the instructor plays a central role in the activities and atmosphere in the classroom. For foreign language students (i.e. learners of a language not primarily spoken in the country of study), this is not such an issue because their primary or sometimes only source of contact with the language is through their classes.

However for second language students (i.e. learners of the language of the country in which they are studying) as soon as they leave the classroom, they face numerous situations in which there is no teacher to mediate or lower their anxiety when having to communicate in the target language. There seems to have been very little research done on this particular aspect of language anxiety. Therefore the researcher has chosen to follow this line of investigation with two particular questions in mind:

1. Do second language students experience language anxiety outside the classroom?
2. If they do experience language anxiety, what helps them to overcome it?
And is there anything that they themselves can do to overcome this fear?
3. The Study

3.1 Participants
The participants in this study consisted of five Chinese students of English: three females and two males between the ages of 19 and 29, with a mean age of 24. All of the subjects began studying English after the age of 17, their native language being Mandarin Chinese. They had between two and eight years’ formal study of English and had spent between three months and six years in Australia, the average being just over three years (m = 3.05).

3.2 Method
The method chosen for conducting this study was a quantitative and qualitative cross-sectional survey. The survey was anonymous and was adapted from one used in a study by Canessa on whether nonnative foreign language teachers also experienced language anxiety (Canessa 2006:3-29). This method was chosen because within the time-constraints given to complete this assignment and the equipment available, it was considered the most effective method of gaining the necessary information. An anonymous survey was also chosen because some individuals may not have felt comfortable talking in an interview about their struggles with language anxiety. Also taking into account that the participants were all Chinese, it was considered that the importance in Chinese culture of “saving face” may come into play when speaking about personal struggles. Therefore writing responses anonymously on a paper survey with no identifying information was thought to be less confronting and would perhaps facilitate more honest and open results.

The survey consisted of four sections (see Appendix), the first of which covered the participants’ basic background information.

Section 2 consisted of 14 items, in a similar manner to the FLCAS, designed to ascertain the level of language anxiety experienced by the subjects upon their arrival in Australia. The participants were asked to think back to their arrival and rate on a five-point Likert scale (Canessa 2006:10) whether or not they agreed with the given statements. The principle for ascertaining an individual’s anxiety scores in this study was the same as those used in Canessa’s study and Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope’s FLCAS. Each participant’s anxiety score was derived by totalling the ratings of the 14 items; responses to negatively worded statements were reversed and recoded, so that a high score always corresponded to high anxiety in the learner (Aida 1994:158).

Section 3 requested the learner to consider whether any of their answers to the statements in the previous section had changed during their time in Australia. It then asked them to write the reasons for any change or lack thereof.

The final section asked the participants if they had experienced nervousness when interacting with native speakers outside of their English classes and if so, whether there were any strategies they used to help them overcome their fear.

4. Results
In answer to the first question, the results of this study indicated that this group of second language did experience at least some language anxiety outside the
classroom. Table 1 shows the students’ scores on the language anxiety scale out of a highest possible score of 70.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Score</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Students’ Language Anxiety Scores

In answer to the second question, how students can overcome language anxiety outside the classroom, one student’s answers indicated that encouragement from the native speaker was important. Student A’s response to item five in section three, states, “When speaking the target language, I could get so nervous I would forget things I knew” This student reported that originally they agreed with this statement, but that they “get over nervous and shy by people’s encouragement and hard working.” This indicates that when a native speaker encourages the student, as argued by other researchers, self-confidence grows, meaning anxiety diminishes.

Whilst only one student directly reported that encouragement helped him/her to feel less nervous, the surveys suggested that all the students used strategies which helped facilitate the forming of friendships with native speakers. A friend is commonly seen as someone who can be trusted and who sympathizes, encourages and supports. In this situation, there is a reduced fear of negative evaluation because of the assumption that one is not going to be judged. Instead, a friend will sympathize with a person’s plight and help him/her. They are much easier to talk to than a total stranger, and, according to the study by Price (1991), students said they find it less stressful inside a language classroom if the teacher is more of a friend. This implication, that students find it easier to practice and use their second language with friends, perhaps explains why the students in this study used strategies which helped facilitate the formation of friendships with native speakers. The way they did this was by putting themselves in situations where, if they were going to form friendships, it would be with native speakers of English.

For example, Student A reported, “I went to a local school to study instead of going to a language school which has lots of students from my country.” A school is not merely a place where one is bombarded with information; it is also a social setting. This student chose a situation where it would be easier to form friendships with native speakers because most of the students in the school would not speak the student’s native language. So in effect, this student would be forced to make friends and converse with native speakers.

Student B reported, “I tried to go to church with native speakers. Then gradually I am not so nervous talking to them in English.” A church is not merely a place of religion; it is also a social and relational setting. Many churches have a reputation for being friendly, so people who in reality have no interest in religion occasionally go merely for the networking and social interaction. This student has selected a situation where in theory it would be easy to form friendships with native speakers and where it would be necessary to communicate in English.

This opinion is echoed by Student C, who reported, “I think the most efficient way to overcome feeling nervous is to interact with as more native speaker as possible. For example joining uni clubs, going to church, watching TV, etc.” This

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student also stresses the importance of cultural knowledge, giving an example of Westerners liking eye contact when conversing, this not being the case in the Chinese context and hence causing stress for the Chinese student when interacting with westerners. The simplest way to get cultural information would be through a friend from that culture who could explain it to you.

Student D further corroborated this pattern of forming friendships by the statement that she was “meeting language partners.” Griffith University has a system of finding a language partner to help students learn their target language. It is an online notice board on which students state the language that they can offer and the language they are learning. Then they try to find someone who is in the inverse situation. They meet as often as desired and share each other’s culture and practice the languages. Students form a friendship with the other person based on their interest in each other’s culture and language. Also, because both parties are still learning, there may not be as much fear of negative evaluation, meaning it may be easier to use the target language.

Student E has spent four years in Australia and is still extremely nervous. “I don’t know how to not be nervous when speak to native speakers. I tried to force myself in a native English speaking environment, but failed. I don’t have the courage.” This student is a salient example of why more detailed and in-depth research needs to be conducted in this area. Why has this student not been able to overcome his/her fear of speaking to people? The results of this survey point towards forming friendships with native speakers as a primary way of lowering anxiety, but for some this may be simpler than others. Other affective factors such as motivation and personality, for example, play a key role in an individual’s willingness to go out of their way to meet new people and practice the target language.

5. Limitations
An obvious limitation of this study is that it was conducted in the students’ target language instead of their native language. This means the participants could have had some problems with understanding the questions in the survey or in expressing themselves.

Another limitation is that this survey calls on memory. In the survey the subjects were asked to think back to their arrival in the target-language country. For one subject that time was only three months but for others it was between two and six years. Retrospect alters opinions and perceptions, and gaps can occur when calling on a person’s memory. Using two surveys, one when they arrived and one several months or years later would quite possibly reveal different results.

Another limitation of this study was its small scale. A very small sample was taken and for any conclusive findings a much larger sample would be needed. Also the survey itself was not in-depth in terms of the questions asked and the factors of personality type (e.g. introvert vs extrovert) were not taken into account, which could have been valuable.
6. Conclusions
Research in the area of language anxiety outside the classroom, in the target language-speaking environment, is an extremely important but severely underdeveloped area of research. It has been proven that production suffers when students are nervous, meaning that they are less effective communicators, lowering their morale. It is a vicious cycle which needs to be broken, but far more research needs to be conducted on how this might be achieved. This examination of a minute sample of Chinese students indicates that friendships with native speakers are essential to lowering a non-native speaker’s anxiety and that students can facilitate the reduction of their own anxiety levels by seeking to form friendships with native speakers. However not every native speaker encountered by the non-native speaker will be cordial with them; they may have some bad experiences, which have also been shown to impact on language anxiety. Therefore more research on the ways in which students can lower their own anxiety levels is vital, because there will not always be a teacher to mediate.

*Author note
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References


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Appendix: Questionnaire

Note: This survey is completely anonymous. Your name will not be published in the paper or presentation.

Section 1: Background information

Country of origin: _________

Age: _________

Gender (put an ‘X’ beside): Male  Female

Native Language(s):_______________________

Target Language: _____________________

How many years of formal (classroom) study of the target language have you had and what is highest level achieved?
________________________________________________________________

How much time have you spent in a target-language speaking country (for example two months in Australia, list all occasions)
____________________________________________________________________

Was improving your English a primary reason for coming to Australia?_______

While in target-language speaking country, how much contact did you have with native speakers? (Please insert an ‘X’ next to the relevant answer)
____a great deal of contact
____some contact
____only occasional contact for survival purposes

How would you describe your command of the target language? (please insert an ‘X’ net to the relevant answer)
____near – native
____adequate for most of my needs
____adequate for most of my needs although I often have difficulty expressing myself or understanding native speakers
____I usually have difficulty expressing myself or understanding native speakers
Section 2: When you first arrived
Think back to when you first arrived in Australia. How did you feel about the following things? (Please insert an ‘X’ in the relevant box.)

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>– It frightened me when I didn’t understand what someone is saying in the target language.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>– I did not worry about taking a course conducted entirely in the target language.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>– I was afraid that native speakers would notice every mistake I made.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>– I was pleased with the level of target-language proficiency I had achieved.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>– When speaking the target language, I could get so nervous I would forget things I knew.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>– I felt overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn in order to speak the target language.</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>– I felt comfortable around native speakers of the target language.</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>– I never felt quite sure of myself when I was speaking the target language in front of native speakers.</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>– I was not nervous speaking the target language with fellow students.</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>– I didn’t worry about making mistakes in the target language.</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>– I spoke the target language well enough to tutor others.</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>– I got nervous when I didn’t understand every word a native speaker said.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>– I felt confident when I spoke the target language.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>– I always felt that the other students spoke the target language better than I did.</td>
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Section 3: Now
Are any of your answers different now that you have been in Australia for a while? Why do you think this has changed? (Please answer ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ If ‘yes,’ write your reasons next to the number. If ‘no’ write any reasons for why it has not changed)

1 ____________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________

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Section 4
If you were nervous about interacting with native speakers of English, were there any strategies which you used to help yourself overcome this fear? (E.g. did you purposely put yourself in a situation where you were forced to communicate in English? Did you only talk to native speakers of English about topics you knew well? Did you get a tutor?)

Thank you so much for your help by participating in this study.