

# The Effects of Teachers' Verbal Behavior on Students' Anxiety—Based on the First-year College English Classroom in China

Runjiang Xu

English Department, Zhenjiang Watercraft College of PLA, Zhenjiang, China  
Email: xurunjiang\_88@hotmail.com

Yucheng Li

English Department, Zhenjiang Watercraft College of PLA, Zhenjiang, China  
Email: leemaomaofuji@yahoo.com.cn

**Abstract**—Language anxiety is one of the most important affective elements in language learning and it is found prevalent among first-year college students for their English study. Their English study cannot be developed without teachers' lessons, so this present thesis sets out to explore the relationship between the two in an attempt to propose some constructive adjustments and strategies for teachers so as to help reduce students' anxiety in the classroom and advance teaching skills.

**Index Terms**—teachers' verbal behavior, students' anxiety, first-year college English classroom

## I. INTRODUCTION

Affective factors have been paid great attention in China over recent years since the college English classroom has seen a gradual shift from teacher-dominated to student-centered one. Such humanistic education advocates teachers to make their good arrangements and utilize efficient strategies to achieve their teaching goals and promote students' English acquisition. The famous Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) demonstrates that affective factors can be a filter to control the achievements of foreign language acquisition. In order to acquire, two conditions are necessary. Krashen (qtd. in Gass, 1997) said that the first is comprehensible input, the second, a low or weak affective filter to allow the input "in". Therefore, teachers take advantage of teaching materials as many as possible in the classroom to reduce the language anxiety which is a negative factor resulting in low spirits for the learners. This paper attempts to observe the influence of teachers' verbal behavior at class on students' affect especially affect of anxiety and provide several teaching methods to overcome affective problems.

## II. ANXIETY AND LANGUAGE ANXIETY

In psychological research, anxiety refers to the intense and enduring negative feeling caused by dangerous stimuli from the outside as well as the unpleasant emotional experiences involved, such as anticipation, irritation, and fear. It is a feeling of dread, fear, or apprehension, often with no justification (Britannica Concise, 2007). It is the product of subjective and internal emotion of human the causes of which may not be present. If anxiety can be described as a state of uneasiness and apprehension or fear caused by the anticipation of something threatening (Nomi Knba, Naoyoshi Ogawa, and Dennis Wilkinson, 2000), language anxiety is the uneasy and anxious mood caused by the process of foreign language learning. Scovel (1978) claims language anxiety is an emotional state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object while Horwitz (1986) regards it as the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system. Language anxiety ranks high among factors influencing language learning, regardless of whether the setting is informal (learning language outside the classroom) or formal (in the language classroom). (Arnold, 2000) There are three components of foreign language anxiety including communication apprehension, negative evaluation and test anxiety. (Horwitz E. K., Horwitz M. B. & Cope, 1986) Students involved in communication apprehension find it hard to express their ideas with accurate foreign-language vocabulary. Those who are fearful of negative evaluation find that they are unable to make the proper social impression and those who are afraid of test anxiety find that they cannot face failure. The three components are claimed by Horwitz to have a negative effect on foreign language learning and this negative effect is viewed by Arnold (1999) as debilitating anxiety.

However, to the first-year college students, the debilitating anxiety problem seems more harmfully operating on them. After they step into the college, they will find everything is fresh around them, such as the new learning environment, new disciplines arranged for them, and the new pattern of English course. Unfortunately the fresh air in some sense does not motivate them in language study but brings some pressure to them. Some students with low proficiency in

English undertake the peer pressure from their classmates with high proficiency in English. Some are not adapted to the college English class from their secondary school. Therefore they are confused whether they can face and handle the work in college successfully or not.

### III. TEACHER'S VERBAL BEHAVIOR IN CLASSROOM ACTING ON STUDENTS' LANGUAGE ANXIETY

Here takes the findings which deserve enough consideration from Gao (2003) as an example. She carried out an empirical study to find that there do exist different English language anxiety levels among the Chinese college students. Generally students are more or less interfered with English anxiety. After Gao's (2003) qualitative study, the potential sources of English language anxiety of Chinese college students in English as foreign language (EFL) Classroom were probed. The results suggest that tests, classroom communication, teaching materials, and classroom atmosphere are the main sources resulting in Chinese college students' English language anxiety in EFL classroom, all of which can be seen to have a certain correlation to teachers' behavior. During Gao's research, she chose several typical students from different anxiety levels (high, average, low) to have their diary entries and interviews which reveal the same content of the atmosphere in classroom, the teachers' behavior and teaching pace and the like. Accordingly, the situation of first-year college students is worth paying more attention. They come from secondary school class where English language teaching is based on teacher-instructing and test-oriented pattern. In the classroom English grammar is emphasized and practical exercises for interacting are neglected. So it is interestingly found that freshmen cannot make a quick adjustment in college English class since the humanistic language teaching is advocated. They are embarrassed when asking to give their own opinion freely but feel accustomed to find a specific answer from textbook. When giving them too much time to answer, teachers tend to make a comparison for having another excellent student to answer, which give the former one unnoticeable anxiety. Sometimes students feel fearful to interact with teacher and their voices get smaller and smaller for they have got experiences that teachers would like to pick their errors every now and then which will get them ashamed in front of their classmates. Although the students' individual variables can be one of the sources of their anxiety, there is no doubt that the role of the teacher is of primary importance in guiding, constructing, and assessing instruction and learning in the classroom. The characters, attitudes and teaching methodology show great influence on students whether it is positive or not. Therefore, teachers' classroom behavior possesses great significance in English teaching and learning.

As to teacher's classroom behavior, it mainly includes two factors, that is, verbal messages and nonverbal ones. For the most part, verbal messages serve primarily a content function while nonverbal messages serve primarily a relational function, or they work as metamessages. The cognitive content of what we are sending to others usually is sent primarily via verbal messages. The affective or emotional meaning we have for the other person is sent primarily via nonverbal messages. (Tu & Ding, 2003) It comes clearly that verbal communication between teacher and students in the classroom can be the main mode of cognitive information and the efficient way of students' comprehensible input. In China, English learners lack of English-using environment, so their language achievements mainly depend on teacher's classroom verbal behavior. Long, Pica, Chaudron and Ellis have carried out studies on this and the results show that classroom speech contains 70% of the teacher's speech. If teachers' speed of speech is too fast, it will cause students' anxiety. Generally speaking, teachers need to find the right time to change his topic to make sure his students can follow. Furthermore, teachers need to take their vocabulary and sentence structures into consideration and use self-repetition sometimes to arouse students' attention so as to make themselves understood. Taking research of the classroom teaching process, teachers' verbal behaviors can be described from three aspects, that is, teachers' speech, question-answering part and teacher's feedback.

#### A. *Teachers' Speech in the Classroom*

As Gao (2003) mentioned in her case study, teacher dominates the talk in the classroom so that they have less time to give a reaction. The same happen in the classroom of first-year college students. Sometimes teacher gets the text paraphrased so difficult that they feel confused to understand the text. Then the teacher move quickly to next part of the text without checking students' understanding. Generally speaking, the pace of first-year college English class is largely controlled by the teacher who indulges himself in achieving his teaching aims with scant attention to the feeling of freshmen and explaining the text as many as possible without noticing the acceptability of freshmen. Gradually students feel pressed by the quick pace and large amount of information ending up with doubts about their language proficiency. To the extreme, some students loss their interests in English study and make up their minds to give up since they consider they will have no future in English study. It comes to teachers' sense that their responsibility is not only to provide a description of English but also to create an atmosphere in classroom by various teaching materials to encourage students learn more. Teachers are required to make a good arrangement of the class including giving certain amount of speech to make sure both the quantity and quality of information students can absorb. At the same time the speed of speech is playing a crucial role in language acquisition. Vocabulary and sentences used by the teacher are important as well. However, teachers may not always speak the same words for this type of input cannot foster development of students with no new linguistic material. Modifications sometimes are applauded for the second-year study.

#### B. *Teacher's Questions Part*

Since the 1970s, there has been a change in the trend of language teaching methods from audiolingualism to communicative language teaching. As the communicative approach has been increasingly accepted and implemented in language classrooms, a growing interest in teaching language in use, rather than linguistic usage is found in the literature of second language acquisition (SLA). Teacher's questioning, as part of English classroom teaching, should not be an exception. (Yang, 2009) This can be seen as one of the tools for classroom interaction between teachers and students. Long (2003) puts forth "interactional hypothesis" to consider how language input is made comprehensible. He provides a model to account for the way in which interactional adjustments in two-way communication aid SLA. So it can be concluded that questions-answering as verbal communication task between teachers and students is used to exchange information so that there is opportunity for students to provide feedback on his/her comprehension. Through this, teachers can check learners' comprehensible input to achieve the goal of language acquisition. Ellis (1994) gives the research from the following eight aspects: 1) Types of questions; 2) Learners' output when they answer questions; 3) Teachers' choice of questions and the learners' proficiency level; 4) Questions in interaction; 5) Questions strategies; 6) Wait time; 7) Training teachers to ask better questions; 8) Learner questioning. Due to the correlation to language anxiety, here puts focus on one aspect: wait time.

Wait time is the pause between a teacher's questions and the learners' response and between the response and teacher's subsequent reaction and follow up (Arends, 2005). On average, teachers wait less than a second before calling on a student to respond, and that only a further second was then allowed for the student to answer before the teacher intervened, either supplying the required response themselves, rephrasing the question, or calling on some other student to respond (Nunan, 1991). If the wait time is given in short, students will find it in a hurry to think over and then just keep silent with their faces blushing. Here provides a suggestion for teachers to give more wait time for students according to their response to let them reorganize their reasons and reduce their nervousness. Furthermore, teachers can guide students by some cues which can break the tension of silence and make students higher promotion.

### C. Teachers' Feedback

Teachers' feedback is given to assess students' performance in the classroom, which can bring positive outcome or negative one. It is positive feedback, more efficient than negative one, that make students know their good performance and motivate them in English study. Nevertheless, there do exist students expressing that they hope teacher can make reasonable evaluation for them not just simple praising words like "good", "excellent". Otherwise, error correction is worthy of being discussed here. The treatment of errors by teachers will influence students' affect. When and how to point out the errors is the key to avoid leaving students depression by "I make mistakes again and I am such a fool". It is a good technique to collect the errors in a list from students and let them learn the list to make a discussion so as to raise students self-conscious of those errors. All what teachers do can obey the principles given by Scrivener (1994): 1) building confidence; 2) raising awareness; 3) acknowledging achievement and progress; 4) helping students to become more accurate in their use of language.

## III. CONCLUSION

To summarize, teachers' verbal behavior do have effects on students' anxiety, especially for first-year college students who undertake more language anxiety in the college English classroom for the different learning environments and teaching purposes between secondary school and college. So it asks teachers' attention to students' anxiety and make some adjustments to reduce their burden in the process of English learning. Accordingly, teachers' verbal behavior cannot be neglected to conduct a perfect interaction in the classroom. Owing to the limited time and space, there are several factors which have been neglected. Further studies might be carried out from other aspects to explore the correlation between teachers' behavior and student's anxiety so as to fulfill the research of college English teaching.

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**Runjiang Xu** was born in Zhenjiang, China in 1984. She received her M.A. degree in Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics from Jiangsu University, China in 2010.

She is currently a lecturer in English Department, Zhenjiang Watercraft College of PLA, Zhenjiang, China. Her research interests include Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Teaching.

**Yucheng Li** was born in Zhenjiang, China in 1982. She received her B.A. degree in English language and literature from Jiangsu University of Science and Technology, China in 2005.

She is currently a lecturer in English Department, Zhenjiang Watercraft College of PLA, Zhenjiang, China. Her research interests include Second Language Acquisition and British Literature.