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The Relationship between Teacher and Peer Support and English-Language Learners' Anxiety

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Abstract

This study sought to shed light on the relationship between support (from teachers and peers) and foreign-language learners' anxiety. A total of 158 adult Taiwanese English-language learners completed three questionnaires: a background questionnaire, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, and the Classroom Life Measure. The results showed that teacher academic support was the most pervasive variable correlated with language-learning anxiety, compared to other types of support (i.e., teacher personal support, student academic support, and student personal support). Language learners felt less anxious when they perceived that they obtained more academic support from their teachers.

Keywords: Foreign language learning, Language learning anxiety, Teacher support, Peer support

1. Introduction

Language learners develop a new mode of thinking, feeling, and acting—a second identity—while learning a second language (Brown, 2001). When language learners are unable to adequately convey their messages, they may feel uncomfortable using the second language and thus develop language-learning anxiety. Horwitz (2000) states that experiencing foreign language anxiety is natural to second-language learners. Learners feel uncomfortable or anxious while using a second language during the initial period when they must by definition present a less precise version of themselves (Horwitz, 2000). Because of this, language teachers should not merely recognize the presence of foreign language anxiety in language learners but also help learners acknowledge, cope with, and reduce their anxiety. In addition, peers play an important role in second-language learning because language learners spend considerable time with their peers and share similar language difficulties. Thus, this paper is intended to shed light onto the effect of these factors, (i.e., teacher support and peer support) on language learning anxiety. Does teacher and/or peer support have a significant relationship with language-learning anxiety?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Learning Anxiety

Language-learning anxiety is defined 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" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.128). Krashen (1985) points out that anxiety has an impact on learners' affective filter, the mental block that impedes

learners' full use of comprehensible input. If the affective filter is high, language learning is prevented, whereas if the filter is low, learning is facilitated. For example, as a result of pressure or anxiety, a student may not be able to answer an English grammar question posed by the English teacher. However, the student may be able to recall the answer for the same question when the teacher asks the whole class, instead of calling on a specific student to answer. Therefore, language-learning anxiety may negatively contribute to language learning.

The correlation between anxiety and performance has been widely investigated. Studies show that language-learning anxiety adversely affects learners' language performance (Abu-Rabia, 2004; Aida, 1994; Gregersen, 2003; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Saito & Smimy, 1996; Young, 1991). Aida's (1994) study found that the anxiety experienced by Japanese language learners had a negative correlation with their performance. Gregersen (2005) mentions that language-learning anxiety serves as a good predictor of foreign-language achievement. Gregersen (2003) explored the reactions of anxious and nonanxious foreign-language learners to their own errors. Participants were videotaped twice: once while being interviewed by the researcher in English and once while watching themselves in the taped interview. Gregersen (2003) found that anxious learners made more errors and recognized fewer errors in a recall situation than nonanxious learners. Gregersen (2003) also found that anxious language learners tend to participate less in language-learning activities in an effort to protect their social image by reducing the possibility of making linguistic errors in front of peers and teachers. Because of their lack of participation, anxious language learners are less likely to develop their linguistic abilities.

In a study investigating whether anxiety affected oral interview performance, Young (1991) found that anxiety had a significant negative correlation with the Oral Proficiency Interview, which was designed to assess oral performance in a foreign language by using a face-to-face structured conversation. The result suggests that the greater anxiety learners experience, the lower their level of oral proficiency. Abu-Rabia (2004) found that a negative correlation exists between language-learning anxiety and spelling performance; namely, the higher the levels of anxiety on the part of learners, the lower their spelling performance. In a review of foreign language anxiety, Horwitz (2001) concludes that language anxiety causes poor language learning in some individuals; therefore, identifying sources of language anxiety is essential.

2.2 Role of Teachers and Peers

Social support from teachers and peers is an important component that may influence student academic achievement. When students perceive that they are emotionally supported by their teacher, they tend to engage more actively and make a greater effort in their academic work (Goodenow, 1993; Wentzel, 1994). They are more likely to apply extended self-regulated learning strategies (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Hallinan (2008) found that students liked school better if they felt supported with respect and praise from their teachers. The more the students liked school, the better their academic and social outcomes. It is nearly impossible to entirely eliminate anxiety, but as Horwitz (2008) suggests, teachers can help students feel more comfortable. Teachers' support and understanding are particularly important. The results from Abu-Rabia's (2004) study showed that the attitudes of seventh-grade EFL learners concerning teacher support were negatively correlated with language-learning anxiety. Horwitz (2008) recommends that language teachers reduce the anxiety level of language learners by helping learners recognize their own discomfort and establish reasonable, as well as achievable, expectations of language learning. Meanwhile, teachers should correct students' mistakes gently, using humor and games to create a relaxed and low-anxiety environment, and engage students in small groups and in pair activities to make them more comfortable.

In addition, peer support should be considered essential to language learners because students spend considerable time together learning the language and encounter similar language-learning challenges. Learners may receive support from their classmates not only in the form of friendship but also in ways that facilitate learning. Peer support has greater reciprocity because peers share equal status (Cauce et al., 1982; Hartup, 1989; Wentzel, 1994). In contrast, teacher support comes from an authoritative relationship. Nevertheless, both forms of support are important (Cauce et al., 1982; Wentzel, 1994).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

A total of 158 Taiwanese college students (108 males and 50 females) participated in this study. All participants shared the same cultural and linguistic background; Chinese was their native language. These students ranged in age from 18 to 21. Participants were from four intact classes and all had enrolled at the university as freshmen. Every participant took an English class from the same teacher during the experiment. The average amount of time they spent learning English was 8.1 years with a standard deviation of 2.18. They came from diverse majors: business administration, chemistry, and industrial/electrical/civil engineering.

3.2 Instrument

The instruments used in this study consisted of three questionnaires: the background questionnaire, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), and the Classroom Life Measure. The background questionnaire was

developed to obtain participants' demographic information (name, gender, age, grade level, major, and years of English learning).

Language-learning anxiety is an established concept in second-language learning and can be assessed by questionnaires. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCAS), which was developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), has been extensively used to measure the extent of students' anxiety levels during language classes. The FLCAS contains 33 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree with an option of neutral. The FLCAS was designed to investigate students' language anxiety concerning communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1991). Communication apprehension is described as learners' shyness resulting from anxiety while using a foreign language to communicate (Horwitz et al, 1991). Language learners' fear of failure or poor performance leads to test anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation is referred to as apprehension, avoidance, and expectation of a detrimental evaluation by others (Horwitz et al. 1991). Sample questions from the FLCAS include: "It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class;" "Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it;" and "When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.129-130). The FLCAS has been rigorously validated for internal reliability, test-retest reliability, and construct validity (Horwitz, 1991; Horwitz et al., 1986).

The Classroom Life Measure was designed by Johnson and Johnson (1983) to assess students' perceptions of 16 aspects of classroom climate, such as cooperative learning, resource interdependence, competitive learning, teacher academic support, teacher personal support, peer academic support, peer personal support, fairness of grading, and so forth. This questionnaire contains a total of 91 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly agree to disagree with a choice of neutral.

Of the 91 questionnaire items in the Classroom Life Measure, 17 pertaining to teacher and peer support were used in this study: teacher academic support (4 items), teacher personal support (4 items), peer academic support (5 items), and peer personal support (4 items). Questionnaire items concerning teacher academic support were designed to elicit students' perceptions regarding the extent to which their teachers cared about how much they learned and wanted to help them learn, whereas questions regarding teacher personal support explored students' perceptions of their teachers' attitudes towards them as individuals. On the other hand, items on peer academic support focused on students' perceptions of the extent to which their counterparts cared about how much they learned and wanted to help them learn. Questions on peer personal support were designed to explore students' perceptions of how much their classmates cared about and liked them as individuals. Sample questions included: "My teacher wants me to do my best schoolwork;" "My teacher likes me as much as he/she likes other students;" and "Other students in this class want me to come to class every day." The discussion of how the validity and reliability of the new set of questionnaire items were established is presented in the Results section of the current study.

Minor modifications were made to the instrument. For example, "foreign language" was changed to "English language." The term "class" in the original Classroom Life Measure was replaced with "English language class." All questionnaire items were translated by one of the authors, fluently bilingual in Chinese and English, into the participants' native language of Chinese. To ensure the practical equivalence and clarity of translation, the translated questionnaires were checked by another bilingual speaker of Chinese and English.

3.3 Procedures

Participants were required to complete three questionnaires on background information, the FLCAS, and the Classroom Life Measure during their regular English class meeting. These students spent approximately 15 to 20 minutes answering the questions.

4. Results

Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the FLCAS and the Classroom Life Measure was calculated to determine the reliability of these two questionnaires. In addition, two factor analyses were conducted to ensure the underlying construct validity of these instruments. Pearson product-moment correlation analyses were run to explore the relationship between support from teacher and students and the level of language-learning anxiety. To further investigate the role of gender, two more Pearson product-moment correlation analyses were conducted.

With regard to reliability, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the FLCAS was .82 and .89 for the Classroom Life Measure. These coefficients suggested that FLCAS and the Classroom Life Measure were reliable measures. Descriptive analysis for participants' responses to the FLCAS is presented in Table 1. The data was rounded to the nearest tenth. Because of the rounding, the percentages may not total 100.

4.*1 Construct Validity of the FLCAS*

An exploratory factor analysis with Promax rotation was conducted to ensure the underlying constructs of the FLCAS items. Four factors were extracted from the data (see Table 2); item 27 was not loaded on any factor. A total of 12 items

(1, 3, 4, 12, 13, 15, 19, 20, 29, 30, 31, and 33) were loaded on Factor 1 and explained 26.8% of the total variance. Factor 1 was labeled as speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Factor 2 included 9 items (2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 22, 28, and 32) and was labeled as comfort with English learning. It accounted for 10% of the total variance. Six items (7, 9, 10, 23, 24, and 25) were loaded on Factor 3 and accounted for 6% of the total variance. Factor 3 was labeled as fear of failing the class. Five items (6, 16, 17, 21, and 26) comprised Factor 4 and explained 4.8% of the total variance. Factor 4 was termed as negative attitude toward learning English. Collectively, these four factors explained 47.7 % of the total variance.

4.2 Construct validity of the Classroom Life Measure

Another exploratory factor analysis was conducted to ensure the underlying constructs of the 17 items of the Classroom Life Measure. Table 3 presents analysis concerning factor loadings, communality, and percents of variance for the factor analysis of the Classroom Life Measure. A total of four factors were extracted from the data: 4 items (items 1 through 4) loaded on Factor 1; 4 items (items 5 through 8) on Factor 2; 5 items (items 9 through 13) comprised Factor 3; and 4 items (items 14 through17) were included in Factor 4. Factor 1, labeled as teacher academic support accounted for 37.0% of the total variance. Factor 2, termed as teacher personal support explained 18.1% of the total variance. About 8.0% of the total variance was accounted by Factor 3, which was labeled peer academic support. Factor 4, explaining 5.4% of the total variance, was termed peer personal support. These four factors cumulatively accounted for 68.5% of the total variance.

4.3 The relationship between teacher and peer support and language learning anxiety

A Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the relationships between teacher and peer support and language learning anxiety. Results showed statistically significant relationships between teacher academic support and speech anxiety as well as fear of negative evaluation ($r=-.23$, $p<0.001$), between teacher academic support and student comfort with English learning ($r=.19$, $p<0.05$), and between teacher academic support and students' fear of failing the class ($r=-.28$, $p<0.01$). Results indicated that teacher personal support significantly correlated with student comfort with English learning ($r=.27$, $p <0.01$); and students' fear of failing the class ($r=-.18$, $p<0.05$).

A significant relationship was found between peer academic support and student comfort with English learning ($r=.23$, $p<0.01$). In addition, statistically significant differences were found between peer personal support and student comfort with English learning ($r=.19$, $p<0.05$).

5. Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between language-learning anxiety and various types of support (i.e., academic support and personal support from teachers and peers). The results of this study revealed that language-learning anxiety and support were correlated. Teacher academic support was negatively correlated with speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation as well as fear of failing the class, but was positively associated with student comfort with English-language learning. The results suggested that if language learners felt academically supported by their teachers, they were less likely to fear negative evaluations and class failure. Academic support helps these learners become more comfortable in their English learning. Moreover, results indicated that teacher personal support correlated with two types of anxiety, student comfort with English-language learning and fear of failing the class, and was positively correlated with student comfort with English-language learning and negatively associated with students' fear of failing the class. These results were in accordance with those found by Goodenow (1993) and Wentzel (1994). If learners perceive that they are emotionally supported by their teachers, they tend to put more effort into their learning. As a result, they are less likely to worry about the negative evaluations or class failure.

Furthermore, both academic and personal support from peers was positively correlated with students' comfort with English-language learning. The results from the current study revealed that any support from either English teachers or peers was positively related with student comfort with English learning. These results were consistent with Cauce et al. (1982) and Wetzel's (1994) claim that both support from teachers and peers are important in students' learning. Both teachers and peers can help language learners feel at ease in a language class. In addition, these results further support Kraseh's (1985) claim that if language learners were anxious, their language learning might be impeded. If language learners perceived that they received more support from their teachers and peers, they were more comfortable. Thus, their English learning would be facilitated.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the relationships between teacher and peer support and language-learning anxiety. Results showed that teacher academic support was the most pervasive variable in relation to language-learning anxiety. It showed significant relationships with different types of language-learning anxiety. Teacher academic support was negatively correlated with speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation as well as fear of failing the class, and positively correlated with student comfort with English-language learning. The more academic support language learners received from teachers, the less they experienced speech anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and fear of failing the class. In

other words, the more these EFL learners perceived their teachers as being supportive and encouraging, the lower anxiety levels they experienced. Results also indicated that teacher personal support significantly correlated with student comfort with English-language learning and negatively correlated with students' fear of failing the class. In addition, peer academic and personal support and student comfort with English-language learning were positively correlated, as were peer personal support and student comfort with English learning. Results showed that all types of support correlated with language-learning anxiety and were facilitative in lowering such anxiety. However, among the different types of support, teacher support seemed to be the most pervasive in relation to language-learning anxiety.

7. Implications for Teaching

The results of this study have several implications for language teaching. We identified the significant relationship between different types of teacher and peer support and language-learning anxiety. Results suggested that a warm and accepting relationship between the teacher and students is important in facilitating language learning. Language teachers should sustain a good relationship with students in order to lower their anxiety and facilitate their language learning. Tallon (2009) suggests that language teachers need to acknowledge the existence of foreign language anxiety and realize that language class can be intimidating for some students. Therefore, language teachers should help make the learning environment less stressful. As Abu-Rabia (2004) suggests, because of the important role of teacher personality and attitude on student learning, teachers should be formally trained in ways to show support for their students. In addition, teachers should help language learners acknowledge, discuss, and cope with anxiety.

8. Recommendations for Future Research

Our results can contribute to the literature on the relationships between support from teachers and peers and language-learning anxiety and on the relationship between different sources of support and language-learning anxiety. More research is warranted to explore the relationship of language-learning anxiety with regard to different learner characteristics: age, gender, years spent learning English, student expectations, and cultural background. Furthermore, future studies using qualitative measures, such as classroom observation and/or interviews, to investigate the relationship between support and language learning anxiety will shed more light on this issue.

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Table 1. FLCAS items with percentages of students selecting each alternative (N=158)

SD	D	N	A	SA
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class.				
1.3	19.6	35.4	34.8	8.9
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in English class.				
5.1	33.5	30.4	24.1	7.0
3. I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in language class.				
3.2	13.3	27.2	37.3	19.0
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.				
2.5	25.3	25.3	38.6	8.2
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English classes.				
5.1	14.6	31.6	39.2	9.5
6. During English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.				
1.9	12.7	45.6	31.0	8.9
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.				
0	3.2	28.5	49.4	19
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my English class.				
8.9	28.5	34.8	24.1	3.8
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.				
1.3	11.4	26.6	40.5	20.3
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.				
5.7	10.1	15.8	34.2	34.2
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over English classes.				
3.8	15.8	49.4	24.7	6.3
12. In English class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.				
1.3	20.3	43.0	30.4	5.1
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answerers in my English class.				
3.2	12.7	31.0	42.4	10.8
14. I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers.				
19.6	32.9	34.2	10.1	3.2
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the English teacher is correcting.				
2.5	22.2	43.0	25.3	7.0

16. Even if I am well prepared for English class, I feel anxious about it.					
5.7	34.2	37.3	17.1	5.1	
17. I often feel like not going to my English class.					
17.7	41.1	27.8	10.1	3.2	
18. I feel confident when I speak in English class.					
8.9	34.2	38.6	15.8	2.5	
19. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.					
7.0	33.5	36.1	20.3	3.2	
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in English class.					
3.2	13.9	24.1	46.2	12.7	
21. The more I study for an English test, the more confused I get.					
5.7	24.7	27.2	32.9	9.5	
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for English class.					
4.4	25.9	42.4	23.4	3.8	
23. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.					
0.6	4.4	27.8	48.1	19.0	
24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.					
0.6	5.1	30.4	51.9	12.0	
25. English class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.					
1.3	21.5	36.7	27.8	12.7	
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in my other classes.					
8.9	31.6	34.2	21.5	3.8	
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.					
1.9	30.4	29.1	29.1	9.5	
28. When I'm on my way to English class, I feel very sure and relaxed.					
2.5	17.1	42.4	29.1	8.9	
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.					
1.9	15.2	36.1	38.6	8.2	
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak English.					
3.2	15.2	29.1	34.8	17.7	
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.					
5.1	18.4	32.9	32.9	10.8	
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English.					
15.8	35.4	39.2	7.0	2.5	
33. I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.					
1.9	10.1	25.9	49.4	12.7	

Note: SD= Strongly disagree; D=Disagree; N=Neutral; A=Agree; SA=Strongly agree

Table 2. Factor loadings, communality, percents of variance for principal component analysis with Promax rotation for FLCAS items

Label	A	B	C	D	
Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Communality
Item 1	.36				.35
Item 3	.78				.55
Item 4	.72				.53
Item 12	.48				.41
Item 13	.73				.44
Item 15	.70				.37
Item 19	.46				.27
Item 20	.81				.66
Item 29	.53				.43
Item 30	.47				.41
Item 31	.47				.48
Item 33	.54				.48
Item 2		.57			.45
Item 5		.63			.46
Item 8		.76			.62
Item 11		.44			.63
Item 14		.63			.51
Item 18		.71			.55
Item 22		.60			.37
Item 28		.71			.55
Item 32		.71			.64
Item 7			.82		.62
Item 9			.56		.44
Item 10			.49		.44
Item 23			.63		.53
Item 24			.44		.39
Item 25			.45		.47
Item 6				.34	.18
Item 16				.62	.64
Item 17				.75	.55
Item 21				.33	.41
Item 26				.58	.65
% of Variance	26.8	10.0	6.0	4.8	
% of total variance					47.7

Note: Label A= Speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation; Label B= Comfort with English learning; C= Fear of failing the class; D= Negative attitude toward learning English

Table 3. Factor loadings, communality, percents of variance for principal component analysis with Promax rotation for the Classroom Life Measure

Label	Teacher Academic Support	Teacher Personal Support	Peer Academic Support	Peer Personal Support	
Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Communality
Item 1	.85				.70
Item2	.77				.51
Item3	.73				.74
Item4	.92				.74
Item5		.50			.69
Item6		.82			.63
Item 7		.71			.60
Item8		.68			.70
Item9			.60		.59
Item10			.81		.65
Item11			.93		.81
Item12			.74		.70
Item13			.46		.66
Item14				.71	.67
Item15				.93	.80
Item16				.85	.76
Item17				.84	.72
% of Variance	37.0	18.1	7.9	5.4	
% of total variance					68.5