Anna Turula
POLAND

Language Anxiety & Classroom Dynamics: A Study of Adult Learners

MUCH OF CURRENT LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGY SEEMS TO BE ORIENTED predominantly toward young learners. This appears a little lopsided as it has long been known that, in spite of the unrivalled linguistic abilities of the young, success in foreign languages is possible in adult life. In this article, I look at the special characteristics and needs of the adult foreign language learner, but not in the context of teaching methods, techniques, and materials. I want to concentrate on the quality of the learning environment, which includes everything from the premises where a class is taught to the whole range of interactions between class participants.

Because the quality of a learning environment is subject to constant changes, we teachers must ask ourselves the following: What does the classroom dynamic mean to us? Can we control it? Can we shape it? I will try to answer those questions by looking at what actually happens in a foreign language classroom, or in the words of Stevick (1980:4), "what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom."

Anatomy of language anxiety

In an ethnographic study I did at private language schools in Katowice, Poland as part of my doctoral dissertation, 50 adult language learners self-reported two hallmarks of the language classroom: motivation and anxiety (Turula 2002). On the one hand adult foreign language learners know why they are studying and, compared to younger students, they are far more determined to persevere. On the other hand, many mature students enter the classroom victimised by a number of prejudices about foreign language acquisition, including common belief in the disadvantage of a late start ("I'm too old to learn English") or the strong feeling that to succeed one needs a special predisposition for learning languages ("I'm linguistically unintelligent").

This uneasiness is probably reinforced by barriers created by the mature nervous system of the adult learner. Students' ego boundaries, fossilised intellectually and emotionally in the process of first language acquisition, become thicker with age, which may cause some adult learners to perceive their performance in the foreign language classroom as unnatural or ridiculous (Ehrman 1999). These factors lead to feelings of "tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening and learning" (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994:284). In other words, adult learners suffer from language anxiety.

Of course, not all adult learners become paralyzed by negative feelings the moment they enter a language classroom. However, every teacher who has taught a group of grown-ups knows that some individuals may be reluctant to speak, especially when they realize or assume that other students are more fluent. I am not suggesting these feelings are alien to younger learners, however, I believe that with age the tension and anxiety associated with learning a new language become stronger and more difficult to overcome.

Sources of language anxiety, in addition to those specific to an individual, can be found in the learning environment. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) distinguish between trait anxiety, which is an individual's predisposition for feelings of tension and uneasiness, and situational anxiety, which appears only under certain circumstances. In a language classroom, these circumstances include what Hadfield (1992) has called *classroom dynamics,* that is, everything that happens in and between the participants. Heron (1989:33) labels these feeling of tension *existential anxiety* and defines three aspects of it that are related to classroom dynamics: acceptance anxiety ("Will I be accepted and liked?"), orientation anxiety ("Will I understand what is going on?"), and performance anxiety ("Will I be able to learn what I have come to learn?"). In order to help adult learners cope, we teachers need to consider how classroom dynamics can contribute to such anxiety.

Language anxiety and classroom dynamics

Davies and Rinvolucri (1990) look at the problem of anxiety by examining the classroom environment and explaining circumstances in which students may feel insecure. Some classroom situations make students feel that they are being judged, they are isolated, and they lack control. Often, teacher routines and the behaviour of classmates lie at the root of such feelings of insecurity.

Being judged in the classroom

Teachers may not realize it, but they are often judgmental toward their students in the classroom. They may show approval or disapproval verbally as well as by their body language. During my classroom observations, I have encountered teachers who openly mocked students and others who praised them without smiling or making eye contact, thus making their positive reinforcement seem insincere.

A powerful manifestation of a teacher's judgement—second only to explicit criticism—is error correction. Whether the teacher corrects the error explicitly, by providing the correction, or implicitly, by indicating the kind of error and giving the student the opportunity for self-correction, can make a difference. The latter technique gives students another chance and tells them that they are capable of self-correction, while the former technique carries the message "You are inadequate." Such a message can also be communicated when the teacher answers her own questions before students have a chance to do so, a very common classroom practice. It is not surprising that weak students, who need more positive feedback than their more proficient

peers, get less time (and teacher patience) to answer than high achievers in the class.

Fellow students are also judgmental when they express their approval or disapproval, show impatience, or mock one another. These behaviors are not beyond the teacher's control; they are most often manifested in a competitive classroom. If the teacher eliminates or minimises competition for the sake of collaboration, there will be fewer opportunities for judgmental behavior by peers. All the sneers, giggles, and snide remarks manifested by the show-off and aimed at winning teacher approval are out of place if the teacher makes it clear that students are expected to work together toward a common goal.

Feeling isolated in the classroom

Students may feel isolated if they are made to feel anonymous. Teachers should use students' names when eliciting and asking questions (Prodromou 1994). Every student in the classroom is a somebody outside it, with a family, hobbies, likes, and dislikes. It is the task of the teacher to tactfully enquire about those areas of the student's life and to get other students interested in them. I remember observing a class of adult beginners when a new student appeared one day. He sat at a free desk but kept his coat on and did not take out any books or paper. The teacher asked his name but neither encouraged him to say anything about himself nor made him feel at home in the classroom. The man left at the end of the lesson and never came back.

Feeling isolated may also mean feeling disregarded. Shavelson and Stern (quoted in Nunan 1989:21) found that teachers tend to have their favourite students and observed that teacher favouritism is manifested in classrooms mainly by inconsistent error correction and unfair distribution of turns. The best liked students have more opportunities to speak and their errors are often disregarded.

Students may also feel isolated if they feel deserted by the teacher—left on their own in a classroom where the concept of learner-centredness is wrongly understood as no control and, consequently, no assistance is received from the teacher. Furthermore, learners have every reason to feel isolated if, in addition, they find that learning a foreign language is reduced to drills and has no connection to real life situations.

The feeling of being alone among one's peers is not uncommon in highly territorial classrooms in which students never want to change their seats or switch conversation partners. Thus, peer favouritism, with manifestations similar to teacher favouritism, can contribute to feelings of isolation.

The arrangement of desks can also create or contribute to isolation inside the classroom. If students do not face one another, or if someone has a place that doesn't allow eye contact with the teacher and fellow students, feelings of not belonging will grow. In one classroom I observed, students sat at desks facing the board and the teacher; there was almost no student interaction. If the teacher asked students to address their peers, they were limited to working only with the students sitting nearby; in some cases they would speak to one another but they didn't turn around to look at the person they were "conversing" with. This was also the only group I had ever seen whose members, while waiting for the teacher outside the classroom before the class started, did not speak to one another at all.

Feeling loss of control in the classroom

The failure to manage classroom discourse is the main reason students sometimes feel they are being deprived of control. When turn stealing replaces turn taking such feelings can occur. If a student is always late to answer a general solicit and personal solicits directed to her are frequently appropriated by others, the student will feel she lacks control over her role in classroom interaction. Similar feelings may occur if group members are not willing to listen to one another, openly show lack of interest, or interrupt the speaker. The teacher's explanations, if unclear or unsatisfactory, may lead to comparable frustration, and the learners feel they have no control over the language as a system. Finally, the feeling of loss of control may be caused by a domineering, controlling teacher, who leaves students feeling that they have no influence over what is going on in the classroom.

Getting what one deserves

A fourth aspect of the inhibiting language classroom—not mentioned by Davies and Rinvolucri (1990) but noticeable in the classes of adults I observed—has to do with feeling unworthy. If a course is held in sub-standard

premises and taught by an unqualified teacher, students may subconsciously assume, "I get what I deserve." In other words, if students receive sub-standard teaching, then they are likely to believe they are sub-standard learners. In classes I observed, students taught by poorly qualified or unprepared teachers seemed embarrassed by the presence of an observer in the classroom and not particularly eager to cooperate. Students who were convinced they were in good hands, however, were more relaxed and did not mind being observed.

Does starting late mean "too late"?

It is not true that anxious adult learners cannot succeed in foreign languages; however, when compared with successful adult learners, we find that success for the anxious learner is much harder to achieve (see Table 1).

Approach, that do not require learners to speak before they are ready to do so. It is not the aim of this article to recommend or criticise these methods, but rather to argue that we teachers have to try to lower the stress that accompanies speaking and listening and to create what Krashen (1986) calls a friendly environment in which learning can be relaxed and stress-free.

A successful learning environment

Having identified the sources of anxiety and inhibition in the classroom, we may ask what are the traits of good classroom dynamics, which make the learning environment more relaxed and learner-friendly? Hadfield (1992) identified these traits based on the comments of teachers she interviewed (see Table 2).

Table 1
A Comparison of Anxious and Good Learners

Anxious Learner	**Good Learner** (Wenden and Rubin 1987)
1. Is reluctant to take risks (Ely 1986)	1. Is willing to take risks
2. Relies heavily on memory	2. Is tolerant of ambiguities
3. Is reluctant to hypothesize (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994)	3. Possesses good cognitive strategies of guessing and inferring
4. Is disorganised and inefficient in recall of learned items (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994)	4. Shows good strategies of monitoring, categorizing, and synthetising
5. Feels apprehension and self-doubt; is frustrated (Arnold and Brown 1999)	5. Shows positive attitude; is sociable and outgoing

What does this mean for language teachers? If we agree that our task is not only to teach but also (or primarily) to assist learning, we cannot escape the conclusion that our main tasks are threefold: first, to identify the causes of language anxiety and loss of self-confidence in the classroom and eliminate or alleviate them; second, to understand the traits of good classroom dynamics; and third, to create a classroom environment in which these traits may flourish.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) associate most language anxiety with listening and speaking. There are methods and approaches, such as Total Physical Response or the Natural

The next question is how can we use our knowledge of such traits to improve the dynamics of our classrooms? What is it we need to do? I believe that what we need is a collaborative spirit, a clear sense of direction, and a sense of fun.

Caring and sharing in the foreign language classroom

The heading above, inspired by Moskowitz's book (1978) of the same title, refers to the humanistic philosophy of language teaching. Students enter the classroom with all their knowledge, feelings, interests, and preferences. Why not encourage them to share? To share, however, means to be open,

Table 2
Traits of Good Classroom Dynamics (from Hadfield 1992:12)

1. Student groups are cohesive and have a positive, supportive atmosphere. Group members are interested in each other and feel they have something in common.
2. The members of the group are able to compromise. They have a sense of direction as a group and are able to define their goals in group as well as individual terms.
3. Group members are not cliquey or territorial but interact happily with all members of the group. Members of the group listen to each other and take turns.
4. Individuals in the group are not competitive and do not seek individual attention at the expense of others. Members cooperate in completing tasks and are able to work together productively.
5. Group members are able to empathise with each other and understand each other's points of view even if they do not share them. The members of the group trust each other.
6. The group has a sense of fun.
7. Group members have a positive attitude to themselves as learners, to the language and culture being studied, and to the learning experience.

which may not be very easy if students do not have an example of someone being open first. This "someone" needs to be the teacher.

During the first lesson in a class I observed, the teacher introduced herself to her students, then took out a bag containing a number of objects. As she revealed them—her copybook from primary school, her daughter's first milk tooth, a wristwatch, a receipt from a supermarket—she told the students about the most important things in her life. When she finished, she encouraged her students to do something similar during the following lesson. They did so enthusiastically, and the second lesson became a festival of sharing. I am not suggesting that the group's character was determined by this single activity, but the students got the clear message, "Don't be afraid to reveal yourself," which the teacher was able to build on later as the course continued.

It is easier to take risks (one trait of a good language learner) when fellow students do not interrupt or ignore you and when they see you as a real person. Group rapport, once developed, can easily be sustained by humanistic exercises. I have seen a variety used quite successfully in classes I observed (see Moskowitz 1978 and Hadfield 1992 for more examples).

Apart from opening oneself up to other people, sharing in the language classroom means that students help each other develop effective learning strategies that enable them to increase their repertoire of cognitive skills (another characteristic of good language learners). The sense of belonging, the pride taken in common achievements, moving toward a common goal, and compromising on the way to that goal are ways to reconcile one's own need for autonomy with the common good of the group.

Clear sense of direction

Another important component of a successful language classroom is the group's ability to define its goals and persevere in achieving them. Adult learners need to know—and it is the task of the teacher to tell them—how particular activities and exercises help them achieve their overall learning aims and, therefore, why they need to do them. The students' joint efforts aimed at achieving common goals have to be reinforced by the conviction that each student's personal needs are important. This means the teacher should carry out some form of needs analysis at the beginning of the course; it does not mean the teacher will be teaching an individualised course of instruction for each student. Successful individualisation in the language classroom enables each student to define his or her learning style and sustain motivation by completing challenging tasks. Individualisation provides a solid basis for ensuring student autonomy. In assuming responsibility for their learning, students exercise independence in their choice of learning

strategies and maintain the right to their own, unmanipulated way of tackling problems.

A sense of direction is easier to maintain if a learner's self-esteem is high and constantly reinforced. Achieving a sense of direction requires frequent, sincere, and evenly distributed appraisal. However, a sense of direction is unattainable if—according to the "I get what I deserve" rule—the teacher is not perceived as respectable, reliable, or trustworthy. Thus the constant professional development and personal growth of every teacher becomes an indispensable means of alleviating student anxiety and improving classroom dynamics. The teacher's personality, knowledge of the target language, professional qualifications, and teaching style, along with the attractiveness of her lessons and her ability to give clear explanations are among the chief factors leading to a successful, motivating classroom environment (Prodromou 1994).

The four components of a clear sense of direction—know-how, motivation, self-esteem, and autonomy—are worth trying to attain, not only because they help students persevere, but also because once attained, through mutual reinforcement (see Appendix), they become self-perpetuating, and thereby propel successful learners toward their goals.

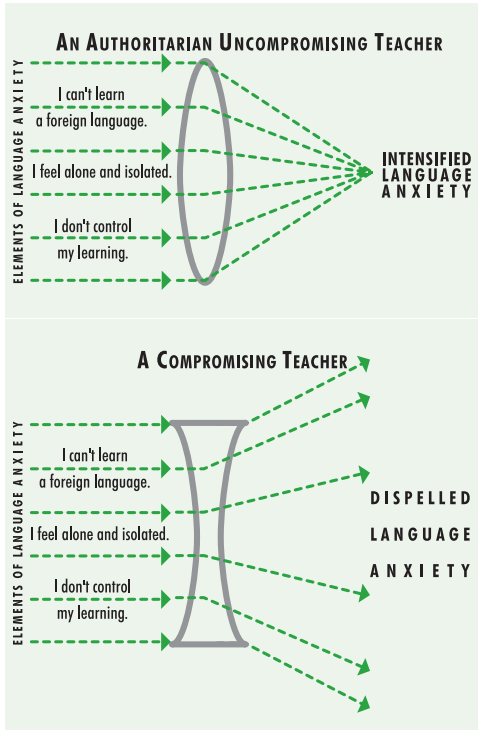
Sense of fun

Adult learners usually come to the classroom immediately before or after work, sometimes preoccupied with family problems and very often tired. Therefore, a sense of fun is indispensable to create a relaxed learning environment and sustain motivation. If the students can have fun together, the teacher can more easily introduce learning strategies and present unconventional, but potentially helpful, teaching techniques and learning activities. Caring and sharing activities can also create a sense of fun.

Conclusion

I would like to use the analogy of a lens to conclude this article. The teacher's response to the language anxiety of adult learners can resemble the way light passes through a lens and its rays are intensified or dispelled (see Figure 1). With an authoritarian, uncompromising teacher, students feel isolation and a loss of control, which creates separation in the classroom while intensifying language anxiety, the way a convex lens intensifies rays of light. With a teacher who creates a friendly learning environment of caring and sharing with a sense of direction and fun, students' feelings of anxiety are dispelled, the way a concave lens spreads rays of light. Instead of separation between students, and the consequent increase in anxiety, there is collaboration and reduced language anxiety.

FIGURE 1. THE LENS ANALOGY: INTENSIFIED AND DISPELLED LANGUAGE ANXIETY



References

Arnold, J. and H. D. Brown. 1999. A map of the terrain. In *Affect in language learning,* ed. J. Arnold. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davies, P. and M. Rinvolucri. 1990. *The confidence book.* Harlow, U.K.: Longman.

Ehrman, M. 1999. Ego boundaries and tolerance of ambiguity in second language learning. In *Affect in language learning,* ed. J. Arnold. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ely, C. 1986. An analysis of discomfort, risk-taking, sociability, and motivation in the L2 classroom. *Language Learning, 36,* 1, pp. 1–25.

Hadfield, J. 1992. *Classroom dynamics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heron, J. 1989. *The facilitator's handbook.* London: Kogan Page.

Krashen, S. 1986. *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications.* London: Longman.

➪ 37