

Anxiety, Frustration, and Bad Experiences When Learning a Foreign Language Interfering in the Oral Production of a Teenager: A Case Study

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Abstract

Learning a language involves more than willingness and effort; it also involves emotions, good and bad experiences, and the effects of all of them in the production of all four skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Sadly, emotions and mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, and overthinking are put aside when learning a language. Mental disorders should have a stronger recognition in learning a language, those can affect the production of the language, therefore; the learners might feel frustrated for not achieving their expected goals in the language.

Keywords: Anxiety, Oral production, second language learning, affective-filter hypothesis, frustration.

1. Introduction

Mental disorders need to have more discussion in the field of second language acquisition, especially when dealing with teenagers. This paper aimed to understand what role the filter-affective hypothesis plays in the oral production of a teenager with anxiety and frustration when it comes to speaking in English. It was of vital importance to address the filter-affective hypotheses in this study as it gave us a wider grasp of the importance of mental disorders when learning a language. This paper also dealt with how bad experiences affect the process of learning a language. It can be assumed that bad experiences and mental disorders go hand in hand when it comes to preventing the learner to produce any language, in this case, speaking production.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Second language acquisition*

It is important to first understand what second language acquisition is and why it is important to define it in this study. Language acquisition can be a concept difficult to define, nevertheless, Ellis (1997) defined it as: “L2 acquisition, then can be defined as the way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue, inside or outside a classroom” (p. 3.) It can be assumed that learning a second language implies doing it so inside or outside the classroom and that it is an additional language besides the mother tongue. “Second language acquisition

research focuses on developing knowledge and use of a language by children and adults who already know at least one other language” (Spada & Lightbown, 2019: 111). So far, it seems that one of the requisites to learn a second language is known at least one language. Second language acquisition was the main aspect to discuss in this study as it is the main factor affected by mental disorders and bad experiences.

“Attempts made by adults to learn second languages incidentally through communicative interaction are only partially successful. Although such interaction has the potential to provide the necessary evidence for acquisition, the use of comprehension strategies and communication strategies motivated by communicative pressure or learner predispositions means that the analysis for acquisition is avoided” (Skehan, 1992 in Schmidt, 1992: 209).

The previous quotation provided an interesting concept to the study which dealt with communicative interaction. Surprisingly, in this case, communicative interaction and communicative strategies were not used by the participant because she tried to avoid them as much as possible when learning a language. Therefore, the acquisition was somehow avoided too at some point.

2.2 Filter – affective hypothesis

Another essential factor to consider in this study was the filter-affective hypothesis. It was due to its relevance and focus on the motivation and self-confidence of the learners.

“Krashen argued that the affective filter is a kind of psychological obstacle that prevents language learners from absorbing available comprehensible input completely. He looked affective factors functioning as a filter that reduces the amount of language input the learner is able to understand. The affective factors include certain emotions, such as, motivation-self-confidence and anxiety and so on in the process of acquiring a second language” (Ni, 2012: 1508).

According to the author, the filter affective includes emotions such as motivation and anxiety. As it was mentioned before the filter affective hypothesis should have more recognition in the field of second language acquisition, because the lower the filter affective hypothesis is the less input the learner will receive.

According to Ni (2012: 1508), “a low filter should be created and advocated for the effective language teaching. It can be guessed that learner’s affective filter will be influenced by teacher’s feedback. Attempts should be made to lower the affective filter and let learners feel less stressed and more confident in a comfortable learning atmosphere.”

Another concept arose here, teacher feedback. No one could imagine that the way teachers provide feedback would be relevant to the affective filter of a learner. However, that same concept (teachers’ feedback) related to one of the bad experiences the participant had when learning a language.

2.3 Input in second language acquisition

Input arose as a relevant aspect when reviewing the literature and the data collected. It seemed that input also played a role in the way the affective filter hypothesis affected the oral production of the participant.

“Though Krashen’s hypothesis sounds appealing and we cannot question the importance of input to language acquisition, it certainly leaves several issues unresolved. When he indicates that speech will “emerge” he does not clarify that this emergence of language may depend on how highly motivated, extrovert, smart, and conscientious learners they are. For the

introverted, less bright, unmotivated, and anxious students language might not emerge for a long time or if so, it might emerge in an unsuccessful fashion” (Birkner, 2016: 20).

It seems that anxiety and motivation are related to each other, especially when acquiring a language. The speech will emerge longer if the learner is not motivated enough plus if the learner is anxious and introverted. Surprisingly, the data collected demonstrated that one of the reasons why the learner’s oral production is being affected is because of the lack of motivation and anxiety. “Anxiety contributes negatively to an affective filter which makes an individual less response to language input” (Krashen 1982, in Ganschow & Sparks, 1996: 199). Once more, anxiety is still the main negative factor why learners may receive less response to input.

2.4 Anxiety

Mental disorders among young adult learners seem to be increasing. Sometimes, teachers might think that a student is idle and does not want to participate in class, nevertheless, several reasons are behind it, and one should be able to identify them. “Anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system” (Spielberger, 1983, in Horwitz, 2001: 199.) It can be inferred that anxiety carries more than tension, nervousness, and worry are also related to anxiety. The data obtained from the participant indicated that nervousness was present when the participant had to speak in the English classroom. “Foreign language anxiety is a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to language classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language process” (Horwitz et al., 1991, in Zheng, 2008: 2). It is important to address the importance of beliefs, feelings and self-perceptions of learners when learning a second language. Let us remember that learners will always have different perceptions of them from our perspectives as teachers. There will be times when anxiety will make students think negative things about them, like if it was self-sabotage.

2.5 Attention deficit

A new aspect appeared when analyzing the data; attention deficit seemed to be part of the problems that prevent the participant from her oral production. “In ADHD attention deficit is most pronounced in situations which lack external communication” (Hesslinger et al., 2002: 178). It might make sense that this mental disorder would be an important factor when trying to speak in English. “Lack of persistence often results in accusations of unreliability and selfishness. Patients often perform poor at college and work in spite of sometimes outstanding capabilities” (Hesslinger et al., 2002: 177). As mentioned by the authors, patients with ADHD often perform poorly at college even when they have some outstanding capabilities. The participant mentioned that her oral production is the most affected due to the attention deficit, however, the rest of the four skills have developed correctly.

2.6 Overthinking

Some mental disorders took part in this study, and overthinking was the unexpected one. However, it helped me have a better grasp of the participant’s responses. “Overthinking is a loop of unproductive thoughts. Overthinking can also be considered as an excessive amount of thoughts that are unnecessary. Overthinking can be associated with anxiety” (Petric, 2018: 1). It is of utmost importance to highlight the association between overthinking and anxiety; these mental disorders have been affecting the oral production of the participant.

One could think that overthinking is not something important or relevant in terms of learning a language. Nevertheless, these mental disorders can influence the lack of performance (spoken) in this case, in a learner's process. Overthinking when combined with anxiety can be a detrimental factor as they do not allow the learner to emerge themselves into the language at all. Overthinker learners are constantly if they should participate or not, whether it is in a spoken or written way.

3. Methodology

This study aimed to understand what role the filter-affective hypothesis plays in the oral production of a teenager with anxiety and frustration when it comes to speaking in English. This study also dealt with how bad experiences affect the process of learning a language. The paradigm this study took was a critical one as "Social constructionism places emphasis on "sharedness" and "negotiation", and the primary function of language is to facilitate those processes in order to create and maintain various patterns of social relations" (Shotter, 1995, in Karataş-Özkan & Murphy, 2010: 457). The paradigm led us to relate the patterns of social interaction and the functions of language to the aim of this study which are the mental disorders affecting a learner oral production.

3.1 Context

The context of this study took place in the city of León, Guanajuato, México. The participant in this case study is currently studying at the university level. This study was carried out in online way due to time constraints with the time's participants' time. The data collected were received online way too.

3.2 Participant

The participant of this case study was carried out with twenty-one years old female who has been learning English for seven years. The participant has been learning the language in private and public schools. Recently, she has not been learning English due to time constraints. The participant has been diagnosed with anxiety and attention deficit. The study took place online way as the participant did not have time to meet up in person. The participant submitted the responses via e-mail.

3.3 Qualitative approach

The main purpose of this research project is to investigate whether age, anxiety, and bad experiences when learning a second language play a role in the oral production of a young adult. The qualitative approach that the study followed was a qualitative one.

"The focus turns to understanding human beings' richly textured experiences and reflections about those experiences. Rather than relying on a set of finite questions to elicit categorized, forced-choice responses with little room for open-ended questions as quantitative does, the qualitative researcher relies on the participants to offer in-depth responses to questions about how they have constructed or understood their experience" (Jackson et al., 2007: 22-23).

In this research project, the data were collected using a questionnaire where the participant expressed their bad experiences when learning a second language, as well as the way her anxiety has been part of their struggle when trying to speak in English. The opinions and answers from the participant were interpreted by the researcher as the focus of this research

project was to see whether age and anxiety played a role in the oral production of a young adult in English.

3.4 Case study

The case study approach is particularly useful to employ when there is a need to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event, or phenomenon of interest in its natural real-life context. The researcher should define the uniqueness of the phenomenon, which distinguishes it from all others (Crowe et al., 2011: 1-2).

Case studies are empirical investigations of contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts. They comprise a bounded system, including an individual or entity and the settings in which they act. The decision to conduct a case study depends on the object to be studied, what the researcher wishes to learn about it, and what he hopes to do with the findings (Hood, 2009: 86). The decision of choosing a case study for this research was because it involves studying it in real-life contexts, which was something that helped me understand especially when interviewing the participant. The case study also demonstrated the reason for the phenomena investigated in this research which was obtained through the interviews to the participant.

3.5 Questionnaires

In order to elicit data from the participant, the tool that was used was a questionnaire. “Questionnaires offer an objective means of collecting information about people’s knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and behavior” (Boynnton & Greenhalgh, 2004, 1312.) This tool was useful when it came to understanding the participant’s attitudes toward the bad experiences the participant had when learning a language. As well as the knowledge the participant has regarding the mental disorders and how they affect the participant’s oral speaking performance.

4. Data analysis procedures

Once the data was received it was time to analyze it and see what responses would be relevant to the study. “Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyze, and report repeated patterns” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, in Kiger & Varpio, 2020: 2). It was important to analyze and identify the responses that the participant provided as well as notice all the emergent patterns in them.

“It is a method for describing data, but it also involves interpretation in the processes of selecting codes and creating themes. A distinguishing feature of thematic analysis is its flexibility to be used within a wide range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks and to be applied to a wide range of study questions, designs, and sample sizes” (Kiger & Varpio, 2020: 2).

As it was mentioned by the authors the use of thematic analysis allowed the process of selecting codes and then creating themes to have a better connection with the participant’s responses and the objective of the study. Thematic analysis was also useful to choose from all the responses the ones that seemed to have the closest connection to the aim of the case study.

5. Results

In this section, I present the results of the study with the objective of answering the role of the filter affective hypothesis in the oral production of a young adult English learner. As well as anxiety and negative experiences affecting the process of learning a language. The

responses of the participant lead to the conclusion that mental disorders should have more recognition when learning a language. Mental disorders can interfere not only with mental health but with learning performance in the classroom.

5.1 Anxiety and overthinking

Once the data was analyzed the mental disorders that seemed to be the main factor in her oral production were anxiety and overthinking. *“I think the anxiety is the one that don’t let me focus”*. Here the participant’s response pointed to anxiety as the one that does not let her focus and class; therefore, it might be a detrimental factor for not paying attention at all in class. When asked if the participant believed anxiety was an influence on her speaking production, the response was sort of interesting because it showed the importance mental disorders need to have when learning a language. The participant mentioned that anxiety makes her doubt herself and then she starts overthinking about the things she has to say and whether her responses are correct or wrong. As well as when she is asked to participate orally the participant feels nervous, starts to have a mental block, and forgets all the things she knows about English, she blushes because she feels exposed, and she does not like it.

5.2 Bad experiences in the English classroom

Another aspect that prevented her from her oral participation was the bad experiences the participants had in the learning process. The participant mentioned that some teachers were rude to her. The teachers were always comparing her to other people and forcing them to participate, as participation was mandatory, her anxiety was usually at a high level because if she did not participate she would not get a grade, and the participant did not like that. This bad experience marked the participant’s language experience due to the participation being mandatory and the fact of always being compared to other people. That is something so bad for teachers to do, I do not think they measure the mental damage they can create on a language learner.

5.3 Motivation

The participant also mentioned that motivation is an important factor, if she is motivated she might want to participate and perhaps enjoy the language-learning process. The motivation was strongly related to learning a language, and the participant is right, when there is motivation there is interest in learning new things about the language by participating. The participant also mentioned that motivation could make her feel safe, perhaps to participate more in the classroom. That was an interesting comment, as it seems the participant was not only demotivated but also felt unsafe.

6. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to understand what role the filter-affective hypothesis plays in the oral production of a teenager with anxiety and frustration when it comes to speaking in English as well as the bad experiences when learning a language. The results indicated that certainly, mental disorders played an important role in the oral production of the participant. The data collected demonstrated that the affective filter of the participant was at a very low level due to the mental disorders and the negative experiences, therefore, the learning was being affected. The bad experiences were the ones that marked the participant in her learning process, participation was mandatory and that made the participant uncomfortable. As participation was mandatory, the participant started to feel anxious and started to overthink her

responses as she would have a mental block and forget everything she knew about the language. It might sound confusing, but even when participation was mandatory, the participant started to speak less and less in the classroom. Nevertheless, the participant was also aware of the importance of motivation in learning a language and recognized that if she was motivated, she would participate more and perhaps enjoy the process of learning. Hopefully, motivation can help the participant immerse herself in the language and allow her to speak more, and not let her mental disorders and bad experiences stop her from doing so.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Do you have any issues that might affect your learning of a second language? Please explain which ones. I have anxiety and attention deficit, but I think the anxiety is the one that don't let me focus on class.

Do you think anxiety is a factor that influences your English production? Why? Yes, of course because it makes me doubt of myself, for example, if I have to speak I start overthinking about what I have to say and then I get nervous, and then when I speak my voice changes it sounds like if I was crying and I don't like it and I don't wanna participate anymore. Also, when I have to write my anxiety don't let me think correctly because I am constantly thinking if I am correct or not.

How do you feel when your teachers ask you to speak in English? I feel nervous, I have a mental block and forget everything I know, and my mind is all black, also, I blush and I don't like it because I feel exposed and that makes me feel bad.

Is motivation linked to your learning of a second language? Why? Yes, because it makes you feel safe and motivated, if you are motivated you can learn faster, also if I am motivated enough, I might like the language and enjoy the process of learning.

Do you remember any situation where you did not feel comfortable to continue speaking in English? Elaborate. Yes, when I was in high school I remember I had a teacher who was always comparing ourselves to her kid, she said he was smarter than us, also the teacher was too strict and I was afraid of speaking because of that, also participation was mandatory, otherwise you will not have a grade, there, my anxiety was high because I felt obligated to do so when I didn't want to, that was a situation where I felt bad because I did not want to speak in English if it was mandatory.

