

Chapter Five
Conclusions and Recommendations
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I. Contribution to EFL practice

The research project covered three main research questions. The researcher proposes that the results for research question one reveal that the two humanistic techniques of experiential awareness and group awareness did result in a decrease in feelings of language anxiety associated with oral communication in the TESOL classroom in the experimental group. The negative effect of language anxiety on the skill of oral communication in another language can be countered by the use of humanistic techniques which take into account the whole-person and attempt to create a positive, affective atmosphere in the classroom. The control groups' anxiety levels remained constant in some cases and increased in most cases. One can, therefore, conclude that in the absence of humanistic intervention or in classrooms where affective factors are not taken into account, student anxiety levels may increase. This is consistent with Casado and Dereshiwsky's findings (2001:540) that language anxiety does not decrease as students become more familiar with a language and progress in their language studies.

The results for research question two were somewhat surprising. The researcher did not expect that there would be a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the written examination results yet the data revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the final written examination. The researcher proposes that the experimental group actually learnt more grammar and vocabulary and were more successful in their written work due to the positive, affective atmosphere of the classroom and the intervention of humanistic techniques which served to encourage and motivate students.

The hypothesis that the experimental group would achieve higher marks in the final oral examination as compared to the control group was disproved. Although there was a difference between the two groups it did not prove to be statistically significant. The researcher proposes that despite the interventions which were put into place to attempt to dispel anxiety regarding the oral examination, anxiety about the oral examination

was greater than the interventions themselves. The oral examination is obviously one of the core anxiety-inducing areas for EFL students and perhaps the purpose of giving students a single oral examination needs to be revisited. The researcher suggests looking at a range of oral assessments which form continuous oral assessment throughout the course. This system may serve to allay anxiety to a certain extent as students will know that there are a number of chances to succeed as opposed to one final oral examination. A wider range of oral assessments may also result in students becoming more familiar and comfortable with oral testing in general.

The results for research question three reveal that the experimental group experienced a lower drop-out rate than the control group. The researcher proposes that students prefer a more humanistic instructional style as opposed to a teaching style which does not take affective factors into account. It is in the financial interests of language schools to investigate the reasons behind student drop-out rates.

The study of the effect of anxiety on oral performance is of vital importance for language instructors in terms of discovering the reasons behind student anxiety and how that anxiety can be alleviated inside and outside the TESOL classroom. Students who have negative experiences in connection with oral communication in language classrooms are likely to be reluctant speakers of the target language and may hold negative attitudes towards the target language and culture. The researcher believes that the goal of the majority of TESOL instructors is to create more effective language learning, to increase students' interest in and motivation for learning a language and to create a sense of achievement and enjoyment in the classroom. Research that provides information on how these goals may be achieved is certain to be considered valuable by those involved in the TESOL industry.

II. Limitations of the study

The following limitations apply to this research project:

- a. The study focused on two humanistic techniques – experiential awareness and group awareness – and their role in reducing language anxiety. The study did not attempt to determine the effect of other types of humanistic techniques on the experience of language anxiety associated with oral communication in the TESOL classroom.
- b. The study was limited to students at level five or the Upper-Intermediate level of an English language course.
- c. The study was limited to foreign students studying English at Wits Language School. All students had spent less than five years living in an English speaking country.
- d. The study was limited to the investigation of humanistic techniques and language anxiety in the TESOL classroom only. Anxiety levels associated with oral performance may produce different results for other languages.
- e. The results of the study were derived from research conducted with adults who had voluntarily chosen to learn English as a foreign language. The researcher does not believe that the results could be applied to children learning English as a foreign language or adults who are forced to take a foreign language course as a compulsory requirement.

III. Practical implications for the TESOL classroom

Language anxiety is defined by Horwitz and Young (1991:30) as a tripartite construct consisting of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Results reported in the literature are consistent with the notion that negative experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, contribute to the development of language anxiety. MacIntyre (in Young 1999:33) states that language anxiety impairs language learning and production and can have a detrimental effect on students' self-perceptions of proficiency. Horwitz (in Phillips 1991:4) discovered that students were highly concerned about the oral component of their language courses and that this anxiety impacted on their self-esteem and led to feelings of insecurity and frustration.

The researcher put into practice the suggestions offered by the literature on how to create a low anxiety classroom environment for the experimental group. The researcher concludes that these techniques were effective in reducing feelings of anxiety about oral communication in the TESOL classroom. The researcher advocates the use of the following practices and techniques in the TESOL classroom:

- a. Discuss and correct students' unrealistic expectations and erroneous beliefs about language learning at the beginning of the course. Be open to having these discussions at periodic intervals throughout the course.
- b. Encourage students to describe their positive and negative experiences inside and outside the classroom in journals. Use their journal entries as the basis for discussions about overcoming feelings of anxiety and shyness when communicating in the target language.
- c. Use pair and group work in the classroom as this reduces teacher talk time and creates a context in which students are encouraged to interact with each other in the target language and to view each other as valid resources of knowledge and experience. The researcher found that the use of pair and group work resulted in active student involvement in the lesson. Pair and group work need not be

limited to speaking activities only as the researcher encouraged students to complete all their grammar, vocabulary and written exercises in pairs and groups which was very successful. Students were also encouraged to provide each other with positive and constructive suggestions on how to improve their speaking and writing.

- d. Use fluency based activities which encourage speaking such as discussions, debates, unscripted role plays and interviews. It is important to allow students to talk freely but also provide the correct support in the form of group error correction at the end of the session. Students also responded well to a range of authentic and interesting materials as opposed to courses which are rigidly bound to the prescribed course book.
- e. Instructors should adopt the role of facilitator and guide and be flexible and open to new approaches and techniques. One of the major goals of the instructor should be that of empowering students and assisting them in their quest for self-actualisation by providing students with the necessary language skills. The majority of students in this study stated that they preferred language instructors to be approachable, friendly, patient and supportive. Instructors who are authoritarian and impatient will only induce anxiety in their students.
- f. This study identified various classroom activities which made students very anxious (refer the Mid Course and Post Course Questionnaires in the appendix). These classroom activities are used on a daily basis in TESOL classrooms throughout the world. It is important to identify which activities create anxiety and then to question the purpose of such activities and whether they can be adapted in the classroom so as to be less anxiety-inducing or discarded altogether.
- g. Language testing is necessary; however, it has been identified as a major cause of feelings of anxiety in the classroom. Instructors need to critically evaluate current testing practices such as the common practice of holding one final examination which results in a pass or fail and consider following the international trend of continuous assessment and a more holistic approach to examinations.

- h. The creation of a positive, relaxed and supportive classroom atmosphere is vital for the reduction of feelings of anxiety and stress. Students who feel secure and comfortable with each other and their instructor are more willing to take communicative risks in the classroom, are more open to sharing information with others and on the whole seem to enjoy the experience of learning another language more than those students who experience anxiety and stress in the language classroom.

IV. Suggestions for further research

During the course of this study, several interesting areas emerged that were also linked with feelings of anxiety on the part of the students. These areas were, however, outside the scope of this dissertation. The researcher believes that these are fertile areas for future research:

- Listening anxiety: Many EFL students stated that they experienced considerable anxiety when listening to English in a variety of forms including movies and television programmes, radio broadcasts, listening exercises in the classroom and English conversations. Students also stated that they struggled to understand different accents particularly in the South African context.
- Writing anxiety: A number of EFL students in this study stated that they felt considerable anxiety associated with writing in English. Students who are anxious about their writing often avoid writing and neglect opportunities to improve their writing skills (Young 1999: 66). The researcher believes that journals could play a fundamental role in reducing writing anxiety by encouraging students to express their feelings of anxiety in written form.
- Grammar anxiety: Several students commented that they felt more anxious during grammar lessons than at any other time. Students felt that there was too much grammar to master in a short period of time and that they generally found grammar instruction to be boring and

difficult. The problem of not being able to apply known grammar rules successfully in speech and writing created feelings of anxiety in many students.

- The relationship between gender and language anxiety: This is a relatively new area of study and one which could provide very interesting results on the impact that gender differences have on language anxiety and ultimate language learning success.