How to Ease the Students’ Anxiety in Intensive English Course

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ABSTRACT

Foreign language anxiety is a situation-specific activity that mainly comes up in the foreign language classroom. It is one of the most important elements that affect the effectiveness of foreign language learning. Reasons that cause foreign language anxiety have been studied by educators both at home and abroad. To realize the effectiveness of the intensive reading course, teacher can promote students’ ability of cooperation and create a harmonious learning environment. And at the same the teaching evaluation mode should be diversified to stimulate the students for more active participation in the learning process both inside the class and outside the class.

1. LANGUAGE ANXIETY

Anxiety refers to “an uncomfortable feeling in the mind usually caused by fear or expectation that something bad will happen” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1998). According to Horwitz and Cope (1986) [1], foreign language anxiety mainly comes up in the foreign language classroom. It is different from other types of anxiety. It is a situation-specific activity. Furthermore, they divide foreign language anxiety into three major dimensions: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Arnold (2000) regards that language anxiety is one of the most important factors that affect the effectiveness of foreign language learning, no matter the learning process is in the language classroom or outside the classroom [2].

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2. RELATED STUDIES ABOUT LANGUAGE ANXIETY AT HOME

Concern has been paid to language anxiety problem by language educators and researchers both at home and abroad.

Studies at home mainly focus on these three questions: (1) What are the factors of students’ language anxiety? (2) Is there a relationship between classroom participation and language anxiety? (3) Is there a relationship between teaching mode and language anxiety?

Zhao Lin concludes that in the student-centered classroom, students’ anxiety level is higher than the teacher-centered classroom. The more the students have to get involved in the classroom, the more anxious they will be. And the factors of students’ anxiety mainly are “fear of negative evaluation” and “communication apprehension” [3]. Wang Yue indicates that out of the three major dimensions of language anxiety, “fear of negative evaluation” tops the others, then “communication apprehension” and “test anxiety”. Language anxiety is negatively correlated with the students’ participation [4]. Zhang Yu concludes that among the three dimensions of anxiety, “communication apprehension” is the most obvious. The factors influencing the anxiety level of the students’ are the teachers’ role in class and classroom participation. When it is a student-centered class, then the students have to participate more, thus the language anxiety level rises. She also regards that answering questions in class, the boring contents of teacher’s lecture, and the lack of communication between classmates are the main factors cause students’ anxiety [5].

In conclusion, (1) “fear of negative evaluation” and “communication apprehension” are the main factors influencing students’ language anxiety. (2) The more students participate in class, the higher the language anxiety level. (3) In a student-centered class, the language anxiety level is higher.

3. HOW TO EASE THE STUDENTS’ ANXIETY IN INTENSIVE ENGLISH COURSE

From the above conclusion, we can see that students are afraid of being the center of the class. In a student-centered class, in order to encourage the students’ output, teachers tend to ask more referential questions than display questions. Referential questions are much more difficult than yes-no questions and questions about confirming checks. The students have to express their own opinions according to their own understanding or personal experience. These kinds of questions are more challenging. Thus the accuracy and fluency of the students’
output become a big challenge for them. The students are supposed to give lectures more and communicate more with their teachers and classmates, then there will be more chances for their mistakes to be found out, which is the reason for their fear of communication apprehension and negative evaluation. However, output is very important for language learners, nowadays teaching mode has changed from the traditional teacher-centered class into student-centered class. Then how to ease the students’ anxiety becomes an urgent issue.

3.1 Learn Cooperatively and Create A Harmonious Learning Environment

As Arnold (2000) regards that language anxiety affects the effectiveness of foreign language learning, no matter the learning process is in the language classroom or outside the classroom. So in the student-centered class, teachers should pay more attention to the class design both in class and out of the class, to help the students ease their anxiety to achieve the effectiveness of the course. The author believes that class design in the intensive reading course can be focused on these three parts: before class, in class and after class. The principle for the class design should be learning before teaching, guiding instead of lecturing. The learning mode should be students cooperating with each other. Teacher can divide the students into pairs or into groups according to different tasks. Encourage them to communicate more with their classmates to fulfill the task together.

Before Class

The students are supposed to fully preview the lesson before class. Some students may not know exactly how to preview. In the traditional way of text preview, the only thing the students tend to do is to check the new words and expressions in the text. In order to ease the students’ anxiety in class, teacher needs to give the students enough guidance to help them get well-prepared before class.

1) Try to arouse the students’ interest in the concerned topic so as to get well-prepared before class, thus promote the degree of participation. Generally speaking, movie and video materials is more likely to attract the students’ attention. Teacher can assign the task for students to collect some information of the concerned topic before class by watching some of the movies and videos. Such as in Book 4, there is a unit for Antarctica. Teacher can ask the students to watch movies and documentaries about the Antarctica and Arctic, get some knowledge about them and try to tell the difference between them based on the information they get from those materials. By doing this, the students can get a better understanding about the topic of this unit. Thus they get prepared and more confident for more output in class. They wouldn’t be anxious because of the lack of knowledge about Antarctic.
2) Make a list of the important and difficult points beforehand, so that the students may have enough time to get prepared before class. Thus they wouldn’t be anxious about missing the points in class. Such as in Book 1, language structure is an important part of each unit. Teacher may make a list of the to-be-learned language structure for the students and point out the grammatical phenomenon in each structure that they need to know. Ask the students to learn these points before class. In this stage, teacher should encourage them to discuss in groups for a better understanding of the to-be-learned points. If they really can’t solve the problem by themselves, then get ready to ask in class.

In class

This is a stage for teacher to check the before-class assignment as well as enhancing the understanding of the knowledge to-be-learned in this unit. For the students have already got some information about the concerned topic in the before class stage, teacher should encourage them to be brave to express themselves.

1) Lead-in part is very important for the warming of the class to ease the students’ anxiety. A well-designed lead-in can better arouse the students’ interest thus attract their attention for a better participation. Such as in Book 1, unit 1, the reading text is about the first day to school. The hero in the story made a big joke of himself in the presence of his new classmates, which made him very awkward. In this case, teacher can ask some simple referential questions for the students to share their experience of the first day to school. What was your feeling then? What happened then? Did anything embarrassed happen? These interesting referential questions can guarantee the output of the students, for all of them have the experience thus they would have the desire to share with others. To encourage all the students to communicate with their classmates, teacher may ask students to first discuss in groups, and then choose the most interesting one in the group to share with the whole class.

2) Positive feedback from the teacher is a very important factor to ease the students’ anxiety. When there is a group discussion task given to students, teacher should also get involved in the activity. For example, teacher should walk around in the classroom to join in the discussion in each group. Encourage those students who talk less to speak out their opinions by giving some hints and guidance. Encourage students to have different opinions as long as they are reasonable. Praise those students for their active participation by using praises followed by comments instead of short, simple praises or praises followed by repetition of responses. If teacher pays more attention to the fluency and accuracy of the answer, students may be afraid of getting the negative feedback from both their
classmates and teacher. So teacher should pay more attention to the content and opinions of students’ answer instead of the fluency and accuracy to ease students’ anxiety. More positive feedback can bring the students a sense of contentment and achievement, thus they would like to participate more. Create a more harmonious communication environment can help ease the students’ anxiety.

After Class

In this stage teacher is supposed to check teaching effectiveness as well as communicate with the students so as to ease their anxiety.

1) After class review is needed in order to enhance the students’ understanding of the lesson. Teacher should assign different types of exercises to promote students’ ability of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Teacher can try more difficult tasks that need the students’ cooperation and encourage students to cooperate in groups to finish some of them. The process of finishing the assignment together and communicate with peers may help create a better atmosphere thus ease the anxiety.

2) Offer students positive feedback according to each one’s own ability of learning. No two leaves are alike. Teacher should treat students as each unique individual, communicate more with the students to ease their anxiety of learning a foreign language. For example, teacher can encourage students to write diaries in English to express their opinions, and teacher should give some positive feedback such as offering some suggestion or some encouragement instead of signing a date. It is a good way for the communication between teacher and students. A good teacher-student relation may help ease the anxiety.

3.2 Diversify the Teaching Evaluation Mode

The aim of the language learning is to promote the students’ ability of using the language. So more attention should be paid to the output of each student from various aspects.

Not only should the results of the final test be considered but also the attendance, the assignment and the class participation. By this way, the students are stimulated to participate more in class thus they would be more active in the process of learning, and atmosphere would be lively so as to ease the anxiety.

The evaluation mode can be in mixed types. The students are to be evaluated not only by teacher but also by their classmates or even by themselves [6]. Evaluation from classmates can promote the communication between students, thus students tend to participate more and express themselves in the process of
group work in order to win a higher remark from their peers. Evaluation from themselves can help them have a reflection of themselves, check if they fulfill their own anticipation and know how to improve themselves later. This is an effective way to promote their ability of self-study. They may have the feeling of self-achievement in the process thus to ease their anxiety in learning the foreign language.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Ease the students’ anxiety is a key element to realize the effectiveness of the intensive reading course. Teacher can realize this by promoting students’ ability of cooperation and creating a harmonious learning environment. And at the same the teaching evaluation mode should be diversified to stimulate the students for more active participation in the learning process both inside the class and outside the class.

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