

# Anxiety and Language Learning : Looking At and Through Diary Studies.<sup>1</sup>

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This paper examines causes of anxiety of a second language learner through the analysis of a diary he wrote during his stay in the United States. The results of the analysis are discussed from three major variables: 1) cognitive domain, 2) external reinforcement, and 3) cross-cultural styles of communication. These three variables are inter-related and can be considered to play a major role in causing anxiety to a second language learner.

## I INTRODUCTION

When it comes to teaching English to students in class, we may tend easily to forget that many more things are happening than acquisition of language skills. The class is part of a community where students are experiencing their educational life: learning their language skills, developing their self-esteem, shaping their attitudes toward both a target language and the people who use it, and setting their goals of learning the language. In other words, language instruction involves not only teaching skills but also dealing with affective factors among students in order to maximize the learners' acquisition of the language. Then, what are the affective factors? Are they facilitating or debilitating the language acquisition of a learner?

This paper will discuss anxiety as a variable affective factor in order to define it more precisely. This may apply to any Japanese

learner of English through a diary study as an ethnographic research methodology. Methodologically speaking, diary studies can be categorized within the history of anthropological research (Long, 1983). For both ethnographers and diarists, the research questions are not predefined, and open-ended note-taking is the typical procedure of data collection:

Ethnographers do not set out to test particular hypotheses in any formal sense. Instead, they try to describe all aspects of whatever they experience in the greatest possible detail. This they accomplish principally by making extensive written notes, usually recording their observations as soon as possible after involvement in the day's activities in order to avoid compromising their own participant role. Note-taking is as systematic and as thorough as the individual ethnographer cares to make it, and much has been written on the subject (*ibid.*, pp. 18–19).

Diary research is generally introspective since the learner of the language reflects upon his or her own experiences.

The diaries taken as examples in this paper are based on a personal journal; therefore the names of the participants are changed and comments damaging to others are omitted or edited.

## II THEORETICAL BACKGROUND : REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Recent classroom methodologies based on humanistic psychology focus on affective factors of learners in the classroom. The syllabus is based on the students' needs analysis and encourages students' initiative in class activities. The role of a teacher may be as a facilitator to help students proceed in class activities smoothly. Thus students are free from the anxiety of being criticized by the teacher. These methodologies

are supported by researchers and methodologists in second language learning such as Gattegno who introduced the Silent Way, Curran who advocated Counseling-Learning, Lozanov who is known as a founder of Suggestopedia, and Krashen and Terrell who advocated the Natural Approach.

As Krashen (1982) discusses in his Monitor Theory, language input that the teacher is trying to make comprehensible to the learner may not be acquired by the learner because the affective filter which is perceived in the learner's psychological reality may be high enough to prevent his or her understanding the input. Krashen defined the affective filter as levels of anxiety within a learner's psychology: if the learner's motivation and self-confidence are low and his or her anxiety is high, he or she will not be ready to pay attention to the language input even if the teacher tries to make it comprehensible to the learner. Krashen also states that the language acquisition will be realized when the learner understands the contents of the speech or writings, and that the process of acquisition is unconscious to the learner in trying to communicate with the speaker in the target language. This process, called "language acquisition," contrasts with "language learning," the formal, conscious study of language rules such as in formal language instructions at school; and the knowledge the learner gets out of "language learning" can only be utilized to check the learner's own utterances for correct grammar as a monitor function. Krashen's model recognizes the learner's psychological states as an important factor for language acquisition. The variable in his or her affective filter is a state of anxiety levels a learner may perceive when he or she produces a second or foreign language.

Scovel (1978: 134) defined anxiety as that which "is commonly described by psychologists as a state of apprehension, a vague fear that

is only indirectly associated with an object.” We all experience human anxieties, and know what anxiety is. The research on anxiety finds that we experience it at various levels. Brown (1987: 106) discussed two levels:

At the deepest, or global, level, trait anxiety is a more permanent predisposition to be anxious.... At a more momentary, or situational level, state anxiety is experienced in relation to some particular event or act.

Some people are by nature generally anxious about many things. They become anxious in any situation, but most of us are more or less anxious about things in a particular situation such as making a public speech in front of a big audience. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) identified three approaches to the study of anxiety: the trait, state, and situation specific anxiety. “Trait anxiety may be defined as an individual’s likelihood of becoming anxious in any situation” (Spielberger, 1983, cited by MacIntyre and Gardner, *ibid.*). They further defined the state anxiety as “apprehension experienced at a particular moment in time.” State anxiety may be a mixture of the trait and situational anxieties; for example, people who generally feel anxiety show greater levels of state anxiety in stressful situation such as just before taking examinations. Situational specific anxiety, as they define it, is trait anxiety within a well-defined context “such as public speaking, writing examinations, performing math, or participating in French class” (MacIntyre and Gardner, *ibid.*, p. 90). They reviewed the quantitative, relational studies on anxiety and concluded that a situational specific anxiety gives us the best research approach since situations are so well-defined in this approach that they can be clearly compared for relational studies.

Generally speaking, we may be inclined to view anxiety as a

negative factor, something we always want to avoid. We know from our experiences that we cannot help feeling anxiety before a big test. In methodologies and theories of the second language acquisition, for example, Rogers' humanistic approach as well as Krashen's affective filter hypothesis promotes low anxiety among learners. Brown (1987) discussed the distinction between debilitating and facilitative anxiety. Debilitating anxiety is defined by Scovel (1978: 139) as a drive which "motivates the learner to 'flee' the new learning task; it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behavior." Facilitating anxiety, according to Scovel (*ibid.*), "motivates the learner to 'fight' the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approach behavior." Rogers' humanistic theory advocates a nondefensive approach in language teaching where learners do not feel any competition with one another. Facilitating anxiety, however, promotes adequate competitiveness which motivates learners to study harder.

In Bailey's (1983) study of competitiveness and anxiety in adult second language learning, facilitative anxiety was introduced as a major factor for success, and closely related to competitiveness. Bailey found in her own diary analysis that competitiveness among her peers sometimes induced her to skip class, but at other times it motivated her to study harder as in the case of reviewing material to feel more at ease in oral practice.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) defined two anxiety factors based on the results of a factor analysis of the following nine different types of anxiety by examining the learning and production of vocabulary items. The first was called General Anxiety based on trait, state, test, computer, and mathematics anxieties. The second was labeled Communicative Anxiety based on French class, French use, English class, and audience

anxiety. This study resulted in some individual correlations between anxieties and the learning measures, which raised the question of causality: Does anxiety interfere with language learning and performance? MacIntyre and Gardner (*ibid.*) expanded on a model of reciprocal causation: "While Communicative anxiety has an effect on learning and performance, performance can influence State anxiety." (p. 272) They stated in the conclusion that foreign language anxiety is part of Communicative Anxiety and separable from General Anxiety.

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) defined three components of foreign language anxiety which were cited by MacIntyre and Gardner: they are communication apprehension, fear of social evaluation, and test anxiety. In communication apprehension, learners' inability either to express themselves or to comprehend another person leads to apprehension. Therefore they are unsure of themselves: they may feel that they are not able to function appropriately in a society. This leads to anxiety toward social evaluation. Test anxiety is apprehension over academic evaluation.

Through review of the literature, we found that anxiety surely affects language learning and that situational specific anxieties have something more to do with communication apprehension. It is worthwhile to report some insights on language learning and acquisition by looking through another diary in order to define the cause of situational anxieties more specifically.

### III METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is not to argue in favor of introspective diary studies over experimental research on language learning. These two different approaches give us very different type of information.

Long (1983) calls the former an “anthropological approach” and the latter an “interaction analysis approach” to investigate language process. Long also advocates both approaches for future research on classroom language learning.

The methodology of diary studies then is introspective and descriptive. And the findings of diary studies can be compared, but it may not be known whether or not they can be generalized, since the main purpose is to discover what factors influence the individual language learning process. Long stated that diary studies are concerned with individuals in unique learning environments, so generalization of their findings to other learners and environments is precluded on the basis of the studies themselves. They may be relevant to many or even all learners, or they could be idiosyncratic (1983 : 24).

Learning environments in the real-life world can be viewed as affective domains including motivation, attitudes, anxiety, competition, and the like. In general terms, they are primarily in the area of personal variables (Brown, 1987) or learner variables (Scovel, 1978). Diary studies can contribute to second language learning research in this area.

The diary I used for this research was written by a Japanese student (Let's call him “Taro”.) who spent several years in the United States studying after he graduated from a Japanese university. He kept his diary from 1978 through 1982. Taro's initial motivation to go to the United State was to become an English teacher after he returned. His diary on May 8, 1978 says, “I should study about how to become an educator in Japan.... I feel how difficult it is to become a really qualified English teacher.” I concentrated on his experiences related to his language learning in which I recognized three prevalent themes. They were (1) Taro's response to the social and cultural environment ; (2) his reaction

to the language environment ; (3) his need for positive reinforcement.

#### IV ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

In reading the diary Taro kept during early periods of his stay in the States, I noticed that he often suffered from frustration with language problems. Though he had already had about five years residency in the United States, his perception of his own language proficiency was not high enough for arguing with his American classmates. The diary on March 6, 1978 says :

In the evening class, we talked about the topic of learning foreign language in America : whether or not it is necessary for Americans to learn a foreign language. I think that Americans talk as if they don't need to learn other languages. Instead, they expect, or even force, others who have a different first language to speak English as fluently as they speak. Even while they are in a foreign country, they expect people around them to speak English. I don't think this is the right way to develop our mutual understanding among peoples of different nations. I wanted to say things like this in the class, but I couldn't. Why? What is wrong with me? This is a real problem with me right now.

Here, Taro could express his idea in the diary, but could not join in the class discussion. He had his own opinion concerning the discussion topic, but perceived his own language proficiency as much lower than his classmates' and so decided to keep silent. He was afraid of being asked any questions if he spoke up in class. The diary on March 7, 1978 shows a similar case at a restaurant which frustrated Taro :

My wife and I went to Pioneer Chicken for dinner. After all, we could not enjoy it at all because a girl at the counter gave me a wrong order. Even though I told her, "a chicken box," she gave me "a fish



box.” Is she crazy? Well, even if I had “a chicken box,” I would not have enjoyed it because of its greasiness.... we had a bad evening today.

Taro was upset about a wrong order he got at the restaurant. The girl at the counter mistook “a fish box” for “a chicken box.” He could have asked her to change the fish box to a chicken box, but he didn’t. Taro seemed to be afraid of confrontation with the girl, a native speaker of English. His lowly esteemed language proficiency made him accept “a fish box” even though that was not what he really wanted. He wrote how he worried about his English ability decreasing :

Recently, I have worried a little bit about my English. If I am always around Japanese people, my English becomes worse gradually. However, I don’t think it is true to me if I have enough motivation to improve my English. The most important thing is my own motivation. I don’t have to worry about decreasing proficiency if I maintain enough motivation to study English (an excerpt from Taro’s diary on April 3, 1978).

It appears that being among Japanese people was perceived as having a negative effect on Taro’s language learning. He was afraid of losing his English language proficiency over time spent with his own people. The first sentence showed his frustration over what he perceived as low English proficiency, and Taro tried to rationalize his own anxiety by being with fellow Japanese. As a self-defense mechanism, he used motivation to solve the anxiety.

During this period, Taro suffered from the fear of public failure in case an argument with a native speaker of English broke out. This fear of public failure made him believe that his language proficiency was not adequate enough to compete with native speakers of English. This made him passive in his attitude and frightened to confront others. Eventually

he lost his opportunity to speak up in class and his chance to use English in public, which obviously hindered his language learning. Fear of public failure, therefore, functions as debilitating anxiety. At the same time, anxiety over his language proficiency motivated Taro to study English harder. As stated in Maslow's deficiency motivation (Maslow, 1970 cited by Brown, 1987)<sup>2</sup>, moderate lack of self-esteem in language proficiency became facilitative anxiety. He was motivated to participate in class discussions and in society.

The diary also shows that low self-esteem in English was considered the result of being among Japanese people. It is true that there are many foreigners who use their own language all the time and do not associate with local people in the United States. As a result they use a simplified version of English only for the purpose of here and there communication such as Pidgin<sup>3</sup> English and do not use English for fully functioning daily conversation. Obviously Taro was afraid of his English becoming a simple version like Pidgin English.

His self-consciousness and anxiety about his language proficiency could stem from his birth :

I went to the meeting of Teaching English Second Language Program.... Every time I speak in public I feel awkward with my English. I know I don't have to feel small but my perception of an inferiority complex bothers me. What is the main problem? I know the best solution is to acquire the English language system thoroughly. Everyday I feel progress, but.... (September 25, 1981).

Here, Taro "feels small," or feels little confidence in speaking in public, and thinks that this is because of his inferiority complex. He does not know where it comes from, but wants to find out the cause. He thinks that it comes from his English ability and tries to find a solution in

English grammar : he cannot speak English in public because he does not know English grammar thoroughly. Grammatical competence is an essential part of communication, but there are so many other factors involved in using English for communication. This idea, focusing only upon grammatical problems, is a residue of the formal teaching of English at Japanese school. The anxiety Taro feels originated from his trait if we read the following part of the diary :

My wife and I were invited to the birthday party for Betty. It was held at Jack's house.... Well, everybody was frank and open to me but I was a little bit shy. It took me for a while to open my heart to the people at the party. I don't know why, but I was cautious toward reaching out to everybody somehow. I think I used to be called "a 'lion' at home and a 'mouse' outside" in my childhood, which means that I was spoiled at home and became talkative, but once I went out in the world, I tended to be quiet. Therefore, this kind of tendency still remains in my characteristics (September 27, 1981).

Being cautious to other people on the street is common sense, but being too cautious at a party sometimes makes a person shy away. Taro was shy at the party and explained that the reason was his nature nurtured during his childhood : he had been spoiled at home. This anxiety may result from his own idiosyncrasy, but sounds like it is culture-specific. Being polite in Japan means keeping some psychological distance between self and others, sometimes by using honorific words, while in the United States it is considered proper to be friendly and eliminate the psychological distance between people. Therefore, being frank is a well-accepted strategy at a party in the States, but not in Japan. Taro did not realize why he reacted to his environment in this way. This is due to cross-cultural differences in politeness strategies. His perception of awkwardness in speaking English in public at least partly originated

from cross-cultural differences in strategies. When he expressed himself in a foreign language, he could not help using strategies of his own language, though he had been overseas more than nine years.

The diary has another example of cross-cultural differences which would inhibit Taro from speaking up :

What have I learned from working for Bob this summer?... The first thing I noticed was that whenever I talk with an American in general, I should be certain about my own opinion and give it straight. Here in an American society, whoever speaks well and persuasively will be successful. Look at the presidential election ; the debating is one of the main factors in winning. At the inauguration, the newly elected president makes a speech which is very highly evaluated by the people of the United States. Language is important in this society. English possesses characteristics of a superior weapon in human relations.... When you have power of speech, you will have power in a society.... I can compare this with Japanese society. I have seen many cases in a countryside where people ended up with emotional quarrels when they tried to decide on something important, or else they didn't speak up at all.... The important thing is to be sure of what I am saying and doing in this society (September 8, 1981).

Taro worked for Bob one summer and wrote about what he noticed through his experiences during the summer. He noticed that the problems he had in communication on the job were not only skills of manipulating language or how to speak English, but also of directness and persuasiveness in stating his opinion in English. When he lived in Japan, he had not been trained to speak out either in school or in society. It is no wonder that when he was confronted with a situation that required him to express his opinion, he felt awkward being direct and persuasive. He does not know how to deal with the situation and stumbles over his words. This is one of the major anxiety-causing factors when Taro spoke

English.

At this period of his stay in the States Taro also came to recognize that the important thing was not only how to speak but also what to say in stating his opinion in the classroom :

In the class of Bilingualism, I had to do my presentation on a Japanese language maintenance among the Japanese-Americans of the first generation. I was very nervous. My palms were sweating before my turn came. I intended to speak loudly so that everybody in class could hear me anyway. While I was speaking, I was concerned about my articulation for better pronunciation, but I felt inside my heart that I should have practiced speaking English a lot more (November 12, 1980).

Taro was apparently very anxious about making his presentation of his research in class. He was afraid to fail in making himself understood because of his accent and mispronunciation. He knew how native speakers of English would react if he had a heavy Japanese accent after having lived in the States for several years. Past negative reactions from native speakers of English remained sharply engraved on his mind and made him too conscious and fearful of making mispronunciations.

The following dairy has an example how Taro was encouraged to speak out in class by the teacher and regained his confidence in talking in English in public :

In the class of Sociolinguistics, I talked about Japanese ways of showing respect toward teachers. The professor indicated interested in my talk. I was nervous in the past every time I tried to speak out in class, but now I am confident in giving my opinions in class (February 6, 1981).

As he became familiar with the subject he was studying, he regained his confidence in speaking up in front of people. Taro had spent his school

days in Japan and knows how to show respect toward teachers there. The topic he was talking about in class was familiar to him, and he had good feedback from the professor. Taro built up his self-esteem by talking about familiar topics and by receiving positive feedback from his professor and classmates. He was getting to be well accepted in his class since he tried to contribute his opinions now. Gradually he had been encouraged to speak out in class by the teacher and his classmates.

The feedback received from a native speaker of English is also very important even though he or she is not a teacher of English. He or she is considered an authority in the language. The diary shows some examples influencing Taro's self-esteem considerably :

We invited a friend of ours for dinner at Denny's restaurant. I didn't feel good in the beginning because John told me this morning that my English had not improved since he met me in 1974. I was disappointed with myself because he did not appreciate my English. He is the one person who has known my English for a long time and therefore can determine whether or not my English has improved. I could never agree with one particular idea of his, in that he told me to use English when speaking with my wife. I believe that both the English and Japanese languages are important to me. I cannot lose either one of them. When he told me about this, I told him how important Japanese language was to me (April 11, 1979).

John was an authoritative figure in English to Taro since John is a native speaker of English and had known him for five years. Taro was very sensitive to his own language ability and was discouraged by John's critical comments on his English though John is not Taro's English teacher nor has he been trained to be a qualified teacher of English. Thus, negative feedback influenced Taro's self-esteem in English, but was not so bad as to jeopardize his identity since he had established his own

identity as a Japanese and knew how important his native language was. Japanese language was very important to Taro whenever he felt discouraged from participating in the discussion in class :

By the way, I did not feel well.... besides, I did not have a chance to talk in class. Well, this is a big deal to me recently.... However, since I started teaching Japanese to Mary at home, I have regained my self-esteem. I think I need to feel sure about myself (October 6, 1980).

Teaching Japanese compensated for his lack of self-esteem in class discussion. Thus his native language meant very much to Taro in the United States. It functioned as a psychological defense mechanism for him, and he did not get so discouraged as to withdraw himself from school.

Taro also received a positive reinforcement from his American classmate. This obviously encouraged him to do his best in a graduate school for the following years :

The teacher appreciated my research very much.... In the end when I was talking with a classmate, I told him that I was accepted by a graduate school in Oregon. He was glad to hear that and encouraged me by saying, "Your English is extremely good, Taro" (April 17, 1979).

Taro was delighted because he had been accepted by a graduate school in Oregon. He wanted to talk with his classmate and as a result, received a positive remark on his English. This recognition by his classmate encouraged him very much and so he decided to move to a different state for graduate school. Positive reinforcement was a very important factor for Taro to alleviate his anxiety and give him the self-esteem to pursue advanced levels of English in a graduate school.

## V SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, anxiety is in one of the affective domains which we all share as a human characteristic. Some people however feel more anxious in general by nature, and some are very good at handling anxiety and know how to control themselves. The degree of anxiety level varies according to the situation and environment you are in. Take an example of test anxiety. You may feel nervous when the test is important to you. If you fail a test such as a school entrance examination, you have to wait until the next year to take it again, but if you know you can repeat it soon, you do not have to become too nervous unless you are anxious about everything by nature.

If the level of anxiety is heightened too much, people tend to withdraw from the activity such a case as in Bailey's: "However, the feeling that I couldn't compete in class became so tense that I soon withdrew from this painful situation" (Bailey, 1983: 75). In a second language learning situation, anxiety becomes an inhibition for learning the target language. If it is moderate, the facilitative anxiety motivates a learner to continue learning the language.

From the analysis in this study, several factors are found to affect the causes of anxiety in learning a second language, and can be categorized into three major areas: cognitive domains, external reinforcements as in the Behavioristic approach<sup>4</sup>, and cross-cultural styles of communication. They are all related to each other, and induce anxiety in each specific situation related to learning a second language. They also vary their degrees of anxiety to each individual according to his or her trait anxiety level which is based on his or her personality.

Cognitive domain can be considered with two main aspects: lin-



guistic knowledge and subject knowledge, or background knowledge. An aspect of linguistic knowledge includes grammar, pronunciation rules and appropriate accent. These are more or less based on the learner's perceived inner-criterion. The learner judges his or her own language proficiency and becomes afraid of speaking out. Subject knowledge or background knowledge is an important factor relating with anxiety. If a topic of discussion is familiar to a learner, he or she can be more relaxed than with an unfamiliar topic in a discussion. Therefore it is recommended that a learner obtain the knowledge of a subject in the first language before he or she studies it in English. It is very true that if you change your major, say from Economics at a Japanese college to Linguistics at an American college, and start the new subject in English from the beginning, it is much more difficult than to start the major in a Japanese college and continue studying the same area in an American college.

External reinforcement is another important factor relating with a learner's anxiety. Since a native speaker of the target language is considered an authority of the language by a learner, his or her critical opinions are possibly taken seriously by the learner. Therefore negative feedback from a native speaker causes a learner anxiety. The same goes for teacher feedback. Negative feedback by a teacher can also heighten a learner's anxiety.

The last factor found in this paper is different cross-cultural styles of communication. Since a learner's own cultural style constrains his or her reactions to a new environment, which requires a new style of communication, the mismatch of communication styles induces a learner to have anxiety. A politeness strategy in Japan, for example, maintains a psychological distance between a speaker and a hearer, but this is not true to American politeness strategy in an informal situation.

Thus when we look at the situational specific anxiety, we should consider these three factors as possible sources of anxiety. In this paper, the learner who kept the diary was learning English in the United States, but the same things can be said of an English classroom situation in Japan.

From the results of the investigation, I would like to conclude this paper with the following pedagogical suggestions on dealing with anxiety in an English classroom in Japan.

- 1) Since language proficiency is a major source of anxiety among learners of English, a placement test should be administered and the proficiency level among learners in class should be leveled as equally as possible, so that learners' anxiety level can be alleviated.
- 2) Providing background knowledge on the topic of discussion in Japanese before the English lesson may reduce learners' anxiety level in class. Once a topic in a lesson becomes familiar to the learners, it can be handled in English without any major anxiety by them.
- 3) Negative feedback may result in a strong anxiety among learners in a classroom. As in the Behavioristic approach, positive reinforcement is one of the best remedies for learner's anxiety.
- 4) Cross-cultural consideration should be stressed when dealing with anxiety among learners in an English classroom. When teachers implement communicative activities such as role-plays and discussions in class, there may be mismatches in styles of communication between English and Japanese. Explicit cross-cultural understanding is necessary lest the mismatch cause learners' anxiety.

It should be noted that the diary study in this paper gave some implications on the causes of anxiety among second language learners. As stated in the beginning, generalizations cannot be drawn from this

study, and we should wait for more diary studies to compare and for future experimental research to prove the causes of anxiety.

## Note

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2 "Maslow (1970) listed hierarchical human needs, from fundamental physical necessities (air, water, food) to higher needs of security, identity, and self-esteem, the fulfillment of which leads to self-actualization" (Brown, 1987: 114)

3 A pidgin is a simplified and reduced form of language used for communication between people with different languages, and is characterized by a lack of morphological inflection and grammatical transformations.

4 The Behavioristic approach is based on the behavioristic psychology. Reinforcement is a key for learner's motivation. If there is a positive reinforcement or reward, behavior is maintained; otherwise, it is weakened. Brown (1987: 17-18) states, "According to Skinner, verbal behavior, like other behavior, is controlled by its consequences. When consequences are rewarding, behavior is maintained and is increased in strength and perhaps frequency. When consequences are punishing, or when there is lack of reinforcement entirely, the behavior is weakened and eventually extinguished."

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