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ANXIETY AND INHIBITIVE FACTORS IN ORAL COMMUNICATION IN THE CLASSROOM: A study of third year English Language specialists at the Catholic University in Viseu

MARK DAUBNEY

Introduction

Although one should avoid making the sweeping generalization that talking equals learning, and forcing students to participate when they are not ready, one cannot deny that participation is very important in language learning. When students produce the language that they are studying, they are testing out the hypotheses which they have formed about the language. When they respond to the teacher’s or other students’ questions, raise queries, and give comments, they are actively involved in the negotiation of comprehensible input and the formulation of comprehensible output, which are essential to language acquisition. (Tsui 1996: 146)

Anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process. It is associated with negative feelings such as uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and tension. (Arnold and Brown 1999: 8)

This paper is about anxiety in oral communication in the classroom and has its origins in my personal motives as a teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and the practical needs of our students.

First, the personal motives. For the last nine years, I have taught in various schools, and for the last five I have been teaching second and third year English Language classes at the Portuguese Catholic University in Viseu. Irrespective of the level of students and types of institutions in which I have worked, I have tried during this time, and I stress tried, to foster a classroom environment which has been conducive to learning, fun, thought-provoking, communicative, challenging, stimulating, pleasurable and to which, hopefully, students would want to return.

The practical needs are those of our present university students. The great majority of our students on the Portuguese-English, German-English and French-English courses want to be teachers, the
great majority go on to be teachers, and a sizeable proportion of these become English teachers in Portuguese secondary schools so being communicatively competent is and will be, therefore, of great importance to them. Even if these students do not want to be English teachers, they will still have to pass their teaching practice in English to graduate and become a teacher of their preferred language.

In short, I have tried to help our students to acquire the skills they will need as English teachers in an enjoyable and stimulating learning environment.

In terms of personality, ability, group dynamics and exam results groups of second and third year university students do, of course, differ greatly but generally speaking I have found, like Tsui, that “Getting students to respond in the classroom is a problem that most ESL teachers face” (1996:145). It is a problem that I have increasingly focused on, reflected upon and tried to solve, and it has given rise to the research question of this paper: “Given the vested interest that our students have in communicating in English, why are many of them noticeably reluctant to speak English in the classroom?”

Given my belief that I have generally managed to establish relatively good relationships with students, I have become particularly interested in the idea that our students, for whatever reasons, may be inhibited or anxious about communicating in the classroom and that this inhibition and/or anxiety may be contributing to their reluctance to speak in English as a Foreign Language lessons.

One of the presuppositions of this paper, then, is that our students are, to a greater or lesser extent, anxious about speaking in the classroom, and that this anxiety may be contributing to their reluctance to participate orally in English classes. The other presuppositions that inform this paper are that speaking facilitates language acquisition, and a classroom in which anxiety and other inhibitive factors are significantly reduced will facilitate a healthier learning environment.

The main objectives of this study, therefore, are to try to determine the degree to which anxiety and other inhibitive factors contribute to students’ reluctance to speak in the classroom, to try to identify the situations in which such factors arise, and to study them in relation to speaking in the classroom.

The following section reviews the literature considered to be of relevance for this study and attempts to show how certain constructs, definitions and instruments that have been developed and