
Investigating Language Class Anxiety Using the Focused Essay Technique

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FOR MANY STUDENTS, LANGUAGE CLASS CAN be more anxiety-provoking than any other course that they take (1; 13; 20).¹ Anecdotal reports and an emerging body of empirical research suggest that language anxiety can have a pervasive impact at all stages of language learning and production (14; 19).

In the language classroom, increased levels of anxiety can have a variety of negative effects. Anxious students are less likely to volunteer answers and to participate in oral classroom activities (5). They also tend to avoid difficult linguistic structures that the more relaxed students would be willing to attempt (16). Not surprisingly, therefore, language anxiety has been negatively correlated with language course grades (12) and teacher's ratings of achievement (33).

While anxiety is correlated with these more global measures, its negative influence on the specific aspects of the language learning process must also be considered. Anxiety has been found to influence listening comprehension negatively (10). Anxious students will sometimes report that language class moves too quickly, that they feel left behind, and that they require more time for their studies—a fairly common response to anxiety in any instructional setting (32). Word production of anxious students also tends to be smaller than that of their more relaxed counterparts (10) and their speech tends to be less complex and interpretive (31). Such difficulties can lead to the impression that anxious students are not capable communicators in the second language. The negative implications also extend to tests and examinations where the performance of anxious students may be limited (35).

Beyond the effect of anxiety on performance in the second language, it appears that anxious students experience basic problems in vocabulary acquisition and retrieval. We have investigated, in a controlled laboratory setting, the relation of French vocabulary learning and production to several forms of anxiety (20). A factor analysis revealed that nine different anxiety scales could be represented by two main anxiety dimensions: *General Anxiety* and *Communicative Anxiety*. The *General Anxiety* factor was primarily defined by anxiety unrelated to language or speaking and scores on this factor were not related to the learning or production of French vocabulary. *Communicative Anxiety* was defined by anxiety in interpersonal settings, especially French speaking situations, and was significantly related to both the learning and recall of vocabulary items. More detailed analysis determined that the presence of the two measures of French-related anxiety on this factor likely accounted for its association with performance in French. Therefore, students who are anxious in French speaking situations appear to be disadvantaged from the outset because basic vocabulary learning and production is impaired by the apprehension they experience.

In a subsequent study, twenty-one anxiety scales were factor analyzed to determine their underlying dimensionality (18). A solution with three factors was retained. Four measures of language anxiety were included in the study and these scales formed a factor of their own called *Language Anxiety*. This factor was distinct from both a *Social Evaluation Anxiety* factor, as defined by ego-threat anxieties such as communication apprehension, and a *State Anxiety* factor, as defined by anxiety at particular moments during the study. This study also included measures of initial cognitive processing (digit span) and retrieval from long-term memory (vocabulary production) in both the

native language (English) and the second language (French). When aggregated variables were created to represent each of the three anxiety factors, only *Language Anxiety* correlated significantly with initial processing and retrieval from memory, and then only in the second language.

These two studies also demonstrate the fundamental importance of the type of anxiety under consideration. In both studies, several different types of anxiety were examined, including test anxiety, audience anxiety, and math class anxiety among others. Only in cases where the anxiety was specifically related to a second language context was there clearly a relationship between anxiety and second language performance. This distinction between language anxiety and other forms of anxiety has been made for some time and is now being recognized as a key issue in the understanding of the role of anxiety in language learning (8; 13; 20).

We have suggested a model that attempts to describe the process by which language anxiety becomes differentiated from other forms of anxiety (20). We propose that initially, anxiety is an undifferentiated, negative affective response to some experience in language class. With repeated occurrences, anxiety becomes reliably associated with the language class and differentiated from other contexts. Therefore, we can obtain near zero correlations between, for example, anxiety in language class and anxiety in mathematics class or observe different patterns of correlations between language achievement and various types of anxiety.

Differences between more and less anxious students can be traced back to the manner in which anxiety is presumed to exert its negative effects. The experience of anxiety has been discussed in terms of cognitive interference produced by self-related cognitions (27). Anxious individuals think about their own reaction to a task in addition to the demands of the task itself (6). The content of their thoughts is negative and centred on self-degradation (e.g. "I'm just no good at this"). Less anxious persons do not have such exaggerated self-awareness and can therefore concentrate more fully on the task itself (32). In the case of language anxiety, students in a language class may have negative thoughts that do not intrude on their work in other courses. Anxious students engage in rumination over poor performance that limits their ability to process information in second language situations. Thus, the students

can be aware that only in language class do they experience difficulty. This leads to the differentiation of language anxiety from other forms of anxiety and to the isolation of its effects in the second language context.

Thus far, this model has been tested among more experienced language learners. A recent review of the literature indicates that almost all studies of language anxiety examine it as a stable personality trait, among experienced language learners. Its origins and development have received much less attention (19). Therefore, research is required that directs attention to the nature of language anxiety in its earlier stages among less experienced students. In terms of our model, the focus would be on the stage at which anxiety is not well differentiated. Such research would be valuable in that it could suggest ways in which the development of this anxiety may be curtailed or its effects ameliorated.

One may approach the problem of reducing the negative effects of anxiety as an attempt to change students' self-related cognitions. In a similar vein, studies of attitude change suggest that by requiring an individual to think about a specific aspect of a given attitude, that attitude can be altered, under certain conditions (7). For example, one study found that it was possible to bias self-evaluations along a dimension of "environmentalism" by slight changes in the wording of attitude statements (2). These changes made it easier or more difficult to endorse pro-environmentalist statements thereby directing subjects' perceptions of themselves toward or away from environmentalist attitudes. The subjects saw themselves endorsing either more or less "environmentalist" statements and therefore saw themselves as more or less of an environmentalist.

Our model of language anxiety suggests that this may be possible, especially among inexperienced language students. If anxious students could focus on positive experiences in the second language, rather than on negative ones, the debilitating effects of language anxiety could be reduced.

The present study attempted to manipulate the anxiety level of beginning language learners by asking them to think about and report either positive or negative events from their own experience. These half-page "focused essays" forced the students to concentrate on their own reactions to events making a given type of experience highly salient to *them*. By writing about one type of experience, it was anticipated that

students' perceptions of themselves would become biased in the direction suggested by the essay topic.

Analysis of the brief essays themselves can provide information on the development of anxiety and those specific experiences that students find most anxiety-provoking or most confidence-building. In addition, the effect of essay writing and anxiety levels on language performance tasks, in both the native and second languages, also will be examined.

METHOD

Subjects. Five intact classes from the continuing education divisions of a community college and a large university agreed to participate in the study. These introductory, non-credit classes (Level I) were all designed to introduce conversational French skills to adults. The classes were relatively small and a final sample of thirty-nine adult second language students were tested during an hour of regular class time.

Eight students had to be eliminated from the sample because they did not comply with the instructions. The remaining students had an average of only 3.1 years of previous French education at some time in elementary or secondary school and reported an average of 14.1 years since they had studied French. Therefore the sample may be described as being comprised of inexperienced language learners. By comparison, the subjects in one of our previous studies had an average of 8.1 years of French-as-a-second-language education and all had studied French within the past two years.

Materials. Six anxiety scales were chosen in order to span the range of anxieties that have been included in previous investigations. The scales were: *French Use Anxiety* and *French Class Anxiety* (21), *Personal Report of Communication Apprehension* (23), *Fear of Negative Evaluation* (34), *Trait Anxiety* (15), and *State Anxiety* (29). All of the anxiety scales contained an equal number of items keyed positively and negatively for anxiety and were answered on a seven point Likert scale, with the exception of the *State Anxiety* questionnaire which employed its usual four-point scale.

In addition, subjects were asked to complete the "Essay," "Can Do," "Production Tasks," and "Anxometers" portions of the questionnaire.

Essay. Students were asked to recall an experience that required the use of their French skills during which they felt either very relaxed

and confident or very nervous and apprehensive. Each subject was asked to write a half-page essay on one of these experiences. Approximately half of the students were randomly assigned to write an anxiety essay ($n = 16$) and half to write a relaxed essay ($n = 15$).

Can Do. Twenty-eight items from Clark (3) were chosen to reflect a range of French tasks requiring various ability levels. The abilities of all of the students were unknown at the outset of the study, therefore a range of items representing very simple tasks (such as counting to ten) to moderately difficult items (such as understanding a conversation between two native speakers) was selected. Respondents rated their ability to do each of the tasks on a seven point scale with the anchors "very difficult for me" and "very easy for me." Four sub-scales comprise the overall measure: speaking (eight items), comprehension (eight items), writing (six items), and reading (six items).

Production Tasks. Four measures of language performance were taken, two in the native language and two in the second language: English digit span, English vocabulary production, French digit span, and French vocabulary production. The *Digit Span* included strings of numbers between four and nine digits in length which were administered first in English and then in French. A measure of vocabulary was also taken as the response to a *Thing Category Test* which required the naming of elements of six categories, such as words beginning with the letter "t" or items that belong in a suitcase. Three categories were answered in English and three were answered in French.

Anxometers. Four Anxometers (anxiety thermometers) were administered in order to assess the amount of anxiety created by each of the four production tasks. These measures are single-item, visual analog scales with a range of values from one to ten printed along the side of a thermometer figure (see 18 for an example). Subjects are asked to draw a line on the Anxometer to indicate their level of anxiety during each of the four production tasks.

Procedure. As subjects arrived for class, they were each given one of two forms of the questionnaire. The forms were equivalent except for the type of essay requested. The booklet was arranged such that all of the anxiety scales appeared in the first section with their items randomly mixed, followed by writing of the *Essay*, the *State Anxiety Scale*, the *Can Do* scale, pages on which to respond to the *Production Tasks*, and finally the four *Anxometers*.

Subjects were given as much time as required to complete the self-report sections of the questionnaire. When all were finished, the production tasks were administered by tape recorder. Subjects then were asked to assess their own anxiety reactions to each of the tasks using the Anxometers.

RESULTS

The results of this study can be considered in two broad sections. The first will compare the two essay groups. Content analysis of the themes of the essays revealed that anxious essays were almost exclusively descriptive of speaking events while confident essays were based on both speaking and understanding skills. Also, the essays appeared to influence the self-ratings of proficiency while the objective measures did not differ between the groups.

The second set of results will examine the influence of previous anxiety on both the language performance measures and the reactions to the tasks. In both cases, differences were found based on levels of anxiety, type of task, and the language of the task.

COMPARISONS BETWEEN ESSAY GROUPS

Essay Content. Eight of the students were unable to write an essay on the requested type of experience. Three could not recall an anxious experience, five could not recall a confidence-building one. All of these data were, therefore, excluded from the analyses, leaving the final sample of thirty-one students. No significant differences were found on any measure between those subjects who were included in the analyses and those who were excluded (all t 's < 1.4).

The essays were read independently by two judges who attempted to classify the dominant theme of the essay as requiring speaking, comprehension, reading, or writing ability (100% agreement). The essays, however, actually fit only two of the four potential classifications: speaking and comprehension. A chi square test of independence indicated that the type of skill reported in the essay was dependent on the anxiety group to which the subject had been assigned ($\chi^2 (1) = 3.97$, $p < .05$). The relaxed essay group wrote about having confidence in their comprehension skills about as often as they wrote about speaking skills (forty-seven and fifty-three percent respectively). On the other hand, the anxious essay group wrote almost exclusively about speaking skills (eighty-

seven percent). Recall of an anxiety-provoking experience is highly likely to involve difficulty with speaking skills.

Subjective Ratings of Proficiency. In order to assess the effects of essay writing on the subjective ratings of proficiency, t -tests were conducted on the Can Do scores for each of the four abilities; speaking, understanding, reading, and writing. The only significant difference was obtained for the self-rated speaking ability, with those writing a relaxed essay considering themselves as being more proficient than the anxious essay group (see Table I).

Objective Measures. No differences were found between those writing about a relaxed experience and those describing an anxious experience on the Digit Span or Thing Category Test scores in either English or in French (all t 's < 1.60 , see Table I). Writing the essay did not appear to differentially affect the objective measures that followed it.

Anxiety Reactions to Tasks. When the two groups are compared for differences in State Anxiety, the difference between the groups is not significant (see Table I). Thus, it would appear that simply writing the essay was not, in itself, anxiety provoking or relaxing for either group. Moreover, the differences in the scores on each of the four Anxometers corresponding to those measures are also not significantly different (see Table I). This would indicate that

TABLE I
Effects of Essay Condition on all Dependent Variables

	Relaxed Mean	Anxious Mean	t
<i>Self-Ratings of Proficiency</i>			
Speaking	37.3	29.8	2.85*
Understanding	28.9	26.3	1.44
Reading	23.1	19.1	1.66
Writing	21.9	18.6	1.45
<i>Performance Tasks</i>			
Digit Span			
English	54.9	55.2	0.07
French	44.9	43.3	0.34
Categories			
English	32.6	27.1	1.60
French	16.3	16.0	0.13
<i>Reactions to Tasks</i>			
State Anxiety	34.8	35.0	0.07
<i>Anxometers</i>			
Digit Span—English	4.6	4.5	0.09
Digit Span—French	6.6	6.3	0.34
Categories—English	3.9	3.6	0.33
Categories—French	5.8	5.0	1.00

Note: * $p < .05$.

the anxiety aroused by the performance on each of these tasks also was not affected by the type of essay that was written.

In summary, therefore, examination of the content of the essays revealed that, when called upon to report anxiety-arousing experiences, students focus almost exclusively on situations involving speaking. Confidence, on the other hand, seems to come equally from the ability to successfully comprehend a message or to deliver one. The type of essay written appears to affect the self-ratings of speaking proficiency but not the more objective measures of proficiency. Further, the essay did not seem to influence the level of anxiety experienced by the subjects when being tested. Because the essay manipulation did not influence the scores of the respondents on the production measures, the analyses to follow can be performed without considering the respondent's essay group.

ANXIETY AND PRODUCTION

In order to examine the effects of previous anxiety and language of administration on the four performance measures, two separate analyses of variance were conducted. The first analysis examined the effects of French Anxiety and Language on the Digit Span scores while the second assessed the effects on the Thing Category Test scores. To classify students as high or low in French Anxiety, scores on the French Class and French Use anxiety scales were added together and the total was split at the median.

The scores on both the English and French Digit Span tasks were subjected to a 2×2 Analysis of Variance with the factors being French Anxiety (high or low) and Language (English and French). The results showed significant main effects for both French Anxiety [$F(1,29) = 5.42, p < .05$] and Language [$F(1,29) = 29.33, p < .01$], however, the interaction between the two was not significant [$F(1,29) = .02, n.s.$]. Figure I shows that the Low French Anxiety group had higher mean digit span scores than those with High French Anxiety. Figure I also indicates that the Digit Span scores were higher in English than in French.

The scores on both the English and French Thing Category Tests were also subjected to a 2×2 Analysis of Variance with the French Anxiety and Language factors as in the preced-

ing analysis. The results show that a significant main effect was obtained only for Language [$F(1,29) = 106.89, p < .01$]. Figure I shows that the mean categories scores are higher in English than in French. The differences obtained for the French Anxiety factor are in the expected direction, but are not significant ($F(1,29) = 1.37, n.s.$). The interaction is also not significant ($F(1,29) = .32, n.s.$).

The above analyses conducted with the French Anxiety factor were also conducted with a different anxiety factor in order to examine the importance of the type of anxiety in terms of its effects on the performance measures. A median split on the aggregate of the State and Trait anxiety scales was created as an index of General Anxiety. The results of these analyses are very similar to the results observed for the French Anxiety analyses (see Figure II).

For the digit span tasks, main effects were observed for General Anxiety [$F(1,29) = 4.90, p < .05$], and Language [$F(1,29) = 25.82, p < .01$], while the interaction was not significant [$F(1,29) = .32, n.s.$]. For the categories scores, the only significant effect was for Language [$F(1,29) = 106.1, p < .01$]. A comparison of Figures I and II will illustrate the striking similarities between these analyses. This finding seems to indicate that the source of the anxiety does not matter in this sample. That is, contrary to the conclusions of previous studies, it would appear that situation-specific French Anxiety affects performance on French tasks in the same manner as cross-situational General Anxiety.

The final analysis examined the anxiety reactions to the various production tasks. A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance was performed on the Anxometer scores with the factors French Anxiety (high or low), Language (English and French), and Task (digits and categories). Significant main effects were obtained for French Anxiety [$F(1,29) = 5.54, p < .01$], Language [$F(1,29) = 5.48, p < .01$], and Task [$F(1,29) = 22.90, p < .01$], while none of the interactions were significant (all F 's $< .60$). As shown in Figure III, highly anxious students felt more anxiety during all of the tasks than did the low anxiety group. Also, the tasks in French aroused significantly more anxiety than they did in English. Finally, it can be seen that the digit span test was more anxiety provoking than was the categories test.

FIGURE I
Language Production Scores in Native and Second Languages for the Two French Anxiety Groups.

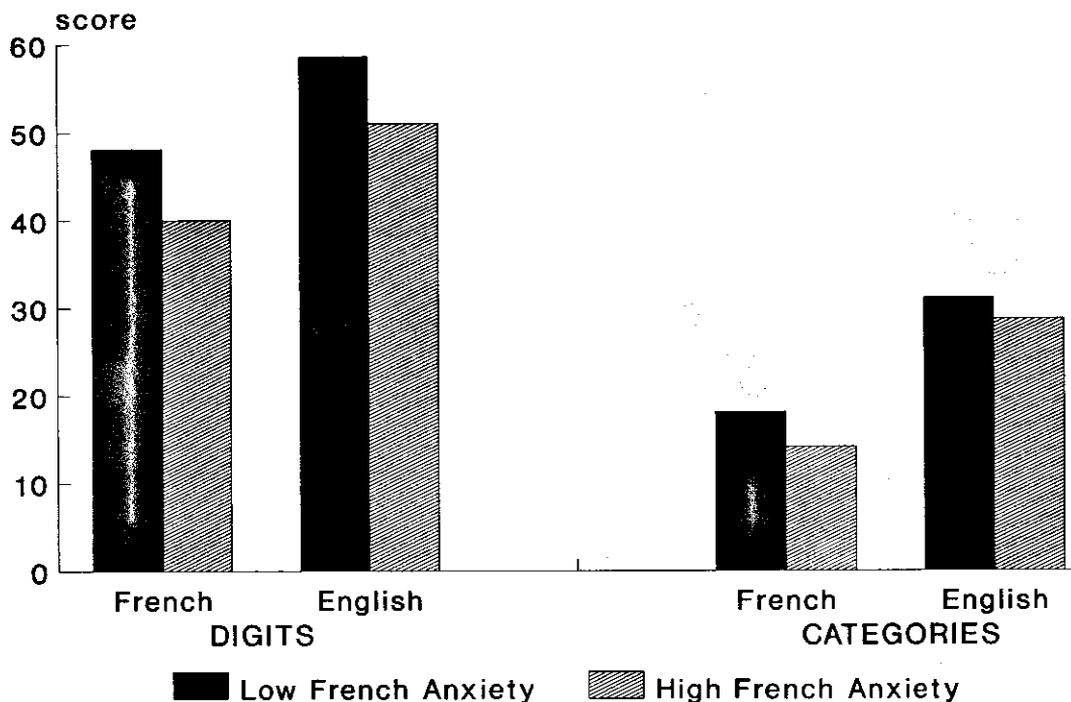


FIGURE II
Language Production Scores in Native and Second Languages for the Two General Anxiety Groups.

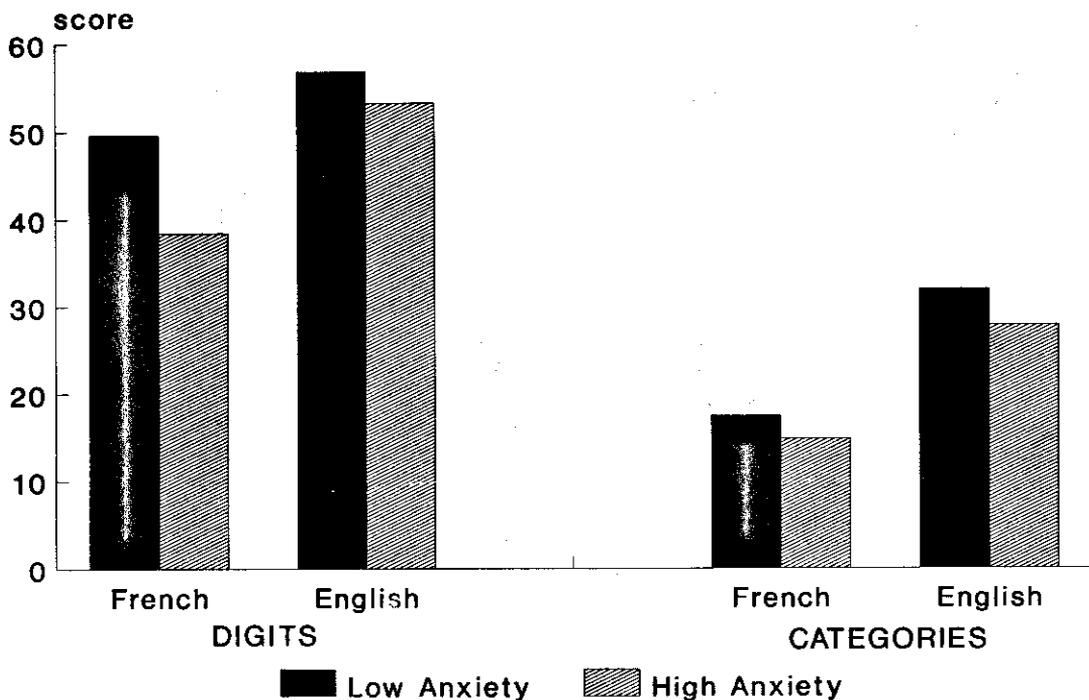
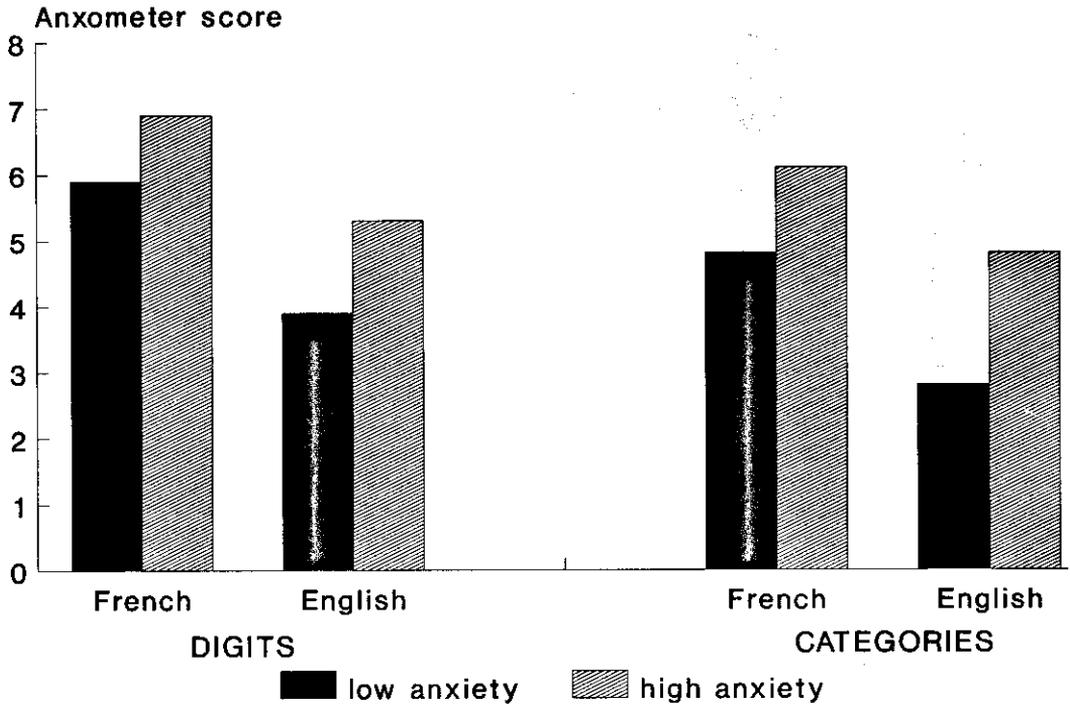


FIGURE III

Anxometer Scores for Each Type of Task, in Each Language, for High and Low French Anxiety Groups.



A similar analysis was also conducted with General Anxiety in place of French Anxiety. The significant main effects were again obtained for Language and Task because these factors were the same as the preceding analysis. In this case, however, neither the General Anxiety effect nor any of the interactions were significant.

DISCUSSION

Some results of this study are quite consistent with those obtained in the literature on Language Anxiety. Previous studies have shown that those with higher levels of French Anxiety tend to perform more poorly than those who are less anxious (19). Also, those with higher levels of French Anxiety tend to experience more anxiety during the activities that involve the use of French (18). Both of these results have been replicated in this investigation. Language Anxiety consistently, negatively affects language learning and production. Therefore, students who often experience anx-

iety in the language classroom are at a disadvantage when compared to their more relaxed colleagues.

Somewhat contradictory with previous research is the relationship observed between General Anxiety and the French production tasks. Several studies have indicated that Language Anxiety can be distinguished from General Anxiety, both theoretically and empirically (13; 19). In two earlier studies (18; 20), we found that only those scales directly related to anxiety in second language contexts were related to performance on second language tasks. In the present study, both French Anxiety and General Anxiety demonstrated the same relation to scores for the French tasks. Also in contradiction to previous results (18), French Anxiety was associated with impaired performance on the English tasks. Thus it would appear, at first glance, that the discriminant validity of the different anxiety constructs is questionable.

Our model (20) may help to explain these apparent anomalies. These beginning language

learners would be expected to experience undifferentiated anxiety because their experiences in language class have not had sufficient time to become reliably discriminated from other types of anxiety experiences. This is reflected in the similar effects of General Anxiety and French Anxiety on the performance measures in both languages. Unfortunately, the nature of the students and the course does not permit a follow-up testing. However, based on the results of the studies previously cited, it would be expected that, as the students progress, only anxiety specifically related to second language learning would be associated with second language performance. This process may be manifested in the reactions to the tasks, as measured by the Anxometer scores, where a differentiation of the effects of French Anxiety and General Anxiety was observed.

Although the anxiety may not yet be fully differentiated, anxiety in French class is a meaningful experience, as demonstrated by Anxometer scores and the content of the essays. The content analysis reveals that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking of second language activities. The frustration experienced when a second language student is unable to communicate a message can lead to apprehension about future attempts to communicate (13; 22; 26). This would explain why anxious students tend to avoid classroom participation (5). Conversely, when describing a confidence-building experience, students concentrated on both understanding and speaking skills. Thus, as suggested by other studies, it would appear that second language communication may be the key determinant of the affective experience in language class (20).

This represents a considerable challenge to conscientious language teachers. In this study, the anxiety provoking experiences described by the eighty-seven percent of the students involved speaking in the second language. On the other hand, approximately half of the reported confidence-building experiences involved the use of speaking skills. Clearly, then, the data

suggest that if teachers can promote the more positive speaking experiences rather than the anxiety-provoking ones, their students will feel better and may learn more efficiently as well. This is certainly a difficult decision to make a priori, although some suggestions for promoting confidence-building experiences have been made (1; 17).

For this reason it is encouraging that the focused essay was successful in altering the self-perceptions of the language students. Those who wrote a relaxed essay indicated more confidence while those writing an anxious essay showed less confidence with their language skills on the Can Do scale. This is a rather subtle manipulation, but it would be the kind of reflection students could perform spontaneously. Conceivably, students taught to emphasize their own successful experiences in the second language would come to perceive themselves as more proficient language learners, increasing their self-confidence (4). This would take the focus away from the second language tasks and direct it toward reactions to those tasks, possibly making the language teacher's job a little easier.

The observed differences in the self-confidence of the two essay groups may be prompted by changes in the self-related cognition of the students. Such a hypothesis would explain the differences in the self-perception of proficiency observed between the two essay groups. That effect cannot be explained by postulating that students in the relaxed group actually relaxed or that the anxious essay increased the levels of anxiety since there were no differences in state anxiety between the groups.

Several studies indicate that self-perceptions can have a profound effect on behaviour (7). While changing a person's self-perception is not easy, the benefits of improving the self-image of language students seem worthwhile. Based on the results observed here, it seems reasonable to assume that, given time and a focus on positive experiences, we may encourage more self-confident and capable language learners.

NOTE

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