**Ольга Іщенко**

**(Львів, Україна)**

**PRACTICAL WAYS TO HELP ANXIOUS LEARNERS**

The role of emotional variables in foreign language teaching and learning has been studied extensively for the last three decades. Among other affective variables, anxiety stands out as one of the main blocking factors for effective language learning. Its damaging effects have been found in all phases of this process, Input, Processing and Output and through the four skills, becoming a barrier for successful performance in all of them.

The relevance of students’ anxiety as an educational problem made some researchers enquire about the fact that the kind of anxiety which affects foreign language learners is of a special kind. Anxiety, which is defined by the authors as “a feeling of tension, apprehension and nervousness associated with the situation of learning foreignlanguage

Foreign language anxiety consists of “self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process”. Foreign language learning process is a unique proccess, because learners are required to communicate using a language which they have not mastered perfectly. Three components of foreign language anxiety have been identified :

a) communication apprehension

b) fear of negative evaluation

c) test anxiety.

Students who exhibit communication apprehension do not feel comfortable communicating in the target language in front of others, due to their limited knowledge of the language, especially in relation to speaking and listening skills. Students who experience fear of negative evaluation do not consider language errors as a natural part of the learning process, but as a threat to their image, and a source for negative evaluations either from the teacher or their peers. As a result, they are silent and withdrawn most of the time, and do not participate in language activities. Students who experience test anxiety consider the foreign language process, and especially oral production, as a test situation, rather than an opportunity for communication and skills improvement.

Apart from general foreign language classroom anxiety, many learners are highly anxious with respect to participation in speaking activities. Indeed, it is often suggested that speaking is the most “anxiety-provoking aspect in a second language learning situation”. An examination of sources of foreign language speaking anxiety showed a correlation between:

a) anxiety and fear of negative evaluation

b) anxiety and perception of low ability in relation to peers and native speakers.

In relation to learners’ perception of low ability, teachers should make interventions in the classroom environment and practices and create a “sense of community in the classroom”, so that students do not perceive it a competitive, while pair and group work can be incorporated.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to bridge the gap between research findings and classroom practice by enabling teachers to identify the sources and manifestations of their students’ Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). This article is also aimed at helping teachers to find suitable ways of handling this educational problem within the limits of their classrooms.

Here is a summary of a few tips to follow to reduce anxiety:

* Use group work to give students practice saying new phrases before asking them to perform individually.
* Acknowledge students' anxious feelings and help them realize that anxiety is a widespread phenomenon.
* Encourage students to concentrate on communicative success rather than formal accuracy.
* Ask yourself how it must feel to be a student in your language classroom from time to time.

**INSTRUMENTS TO DIAGNOSE STUDENTS’ FLA** (Foreign Language Anxiety):

**QUESTIONNAIRE**

1) Do you like English?

2) What do you learn English for?

3) Have you tried to learn English before coming to this school? How was this experience?

4) Before starting at this school did you think that learning English would be easier or more difficult than actually it is?

5) How do you feel about your teachers? What do you like or dislike about them? Give an example of a situation in which the teacher made you feel comfortable or uncomfortable in the classroom.

6) In class do you like learning individually, in pairs, in small groups, in one large group?

7) How do you feel about homework?

8) In the classroom, do you want to be corrected immediately, in front of everyone?

9) Do you mind if other students sometimes correct your written work? Do you mind if the teacher sometimes asks you to correct your own work?

10) Think about your English lessons. Do you feel:

happy when...; angry when....; anxious when...; uncomfortable when...; comfortable when....

11) Think about oral/written tests, do you feel:

afraid when...; insecure when...; secure when....;

**CLASSROOM DIARIES**

Diaries are efficient instruments to access students’ feelings regarding language learning. Some sample questions could be:

1. What did you like/dislike about the last lesson?

2.  How did you feel about the last activity?

3.  What could be done for you to feel more comfortable during classroom activities?

4.  How do you see your own learning of English? Are you making progress in it? What are your main difficulties?

5. Have you ever thought of quitting this course?

6. Are you afraid of failure? Do you fear not being successful in your attempts to learn English?

When students get acquainted with the process of writing diaries, teachers can vary approaches in the following ways:

1. There can be a unique notebook, where, once in a while, the teacher asks the students to give some kind of emotional feedback on the lessons and classroom atmosphere.

2. The writing can be done in pairs or groups, so students can discuss among themselves about their feelings and then write about them.

3. Students can be asked to write one or two sentences about how they felt about a lesson or a particular activity.

**Diaries are:**

**Useful** tools to make a diagnosis of student’s anxieties

**Helpful** in leading students to grasp a more realistic view of the process of learning English and develop a positive sense of their progress.

**Efficient** in making students to set realistic communication goals, recognising theirlanguage learning needs, weaknesses and strengths.

**Practical**, because they enable each student to establish his/her own priorities in terms of extra work to be done out of the classroom.

**CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

a) To build an atmosphere of trust and friendship among the students and the teacher, so the learners might feel they are part of a learning community.

b) To spot sources of anxiety in individual basis in order to approach each student’s anxiety particularly.

**WRITING**

Does a brainstorming session with students in order to elicit their problems or difficulties regarding language learning?

Tell them that they should write a short letter to Ms Abby, who is an expert in second language learning and might help them with any problem or difficulty that might be hampering their learning.

Students write the letters with the help of the teacher if necessary. They should sign them.

Teacher tells the students that they are going to change roles now. They are going to be Ms Abby and will give their classmates pieces of advice on their problems. If the activity takes place in basic or pre-intermediate levels, the teacher can give students some key sentences for advice, such as, *I understand your problems...; I agree with you...; I think you should..., It’s a good idea...; If I were you, I would...*

They should write the feedback on the pieces of advice received.

Teacher collects the letters and give individual feedback on each of them. Students who found the pieces of advice given helpful will be encouraged to build on them. The ones who find their classmates’ advice unsatisfactory will have their doubts and anxieties clarified by the teacher, who can make some recommendations as well.

Here is a summary of a few tips to follow to reduce anxiety:

* Use group work to give students practice saying new phrases before asking them to perform individually.
* Acknowledge students' anxious feelings and help them realize that anxiety is a widespread phenomenon.
* Encourage students to concentrate on communicative success rather than formal accuracy.
* Ask yourself how it must feel to be a student in your language classroom from time to time.

**References:**

1.Allwright D. &Baley K. (1991) *Focus on the Language Classroom.* Cambridge: CUP

2.Campbell C., Language Anxiety in Men and Women: Dealing with Gender Difference in the Language Classroom. In YOUNG, D. J. (Ed) (1999) *Affect in Foreign Language and Second Language Learning: A practical guide to creating a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere*. Boston: McGraw-Hill College, pp. 191-215.

3.Crookall D.&Oxford, R., Dealing with Anxiety: Some Practical Activities for Language Learners and Teacher Trainees. In: *Language Anxiety*(1991), New Jersey: Prentice Hall, pp.141-150.

4.Horwitz E.K., Horwitz, M.B. & Cope, J. (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, v. 70, pp.125-132.

5.Samimy K.K. &RardinJ. N. (1994) Adult Language Learner’s Affective Reactions to Community Language Learning: A Descriptive Study. *Foreign Language Annals,* v.27, pp. 379-389.

6.Young J.D. (1991) Creating a Low-Anxiety Classroom Environment: What Does Language Anxiety Research Suggest? *The Modern Language Journal*, v.75, pp. 426-439.