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An Investigation of the Relationship among Teacher-student Interpersonal Behavior, Anxiety and Students' Achievement in Language Classes

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Abstract

In every academic setting, there are various factors that affect the performance of students. Teacher-student interpersonal behavior and anxiety are some of them. The focus of this study is to review the relationship of teacher-student interpersonal behavior, anxiety and achievement in language classes. Having this objective, samples were taken from St. Mary's University College. The study uses questionnaires and document analysis to collect data. The data collected through questionnaire were analyzed with Pearson Product Moment Coefficient of Correlation. Pearson ' r ' was used at 0.05 alpha levels. That is, the statistical test was calculated at 5% level of significance. Consequently, the observed t-value above 0.05 was considered as non-significant whereas t at 0.05 and below was significant. Teacher-student interpersonal behaviors and anxiety made significant contribution to students' language performance. As a result, it was concluded that there were valuable correlations among teacher-student interpersonal behavior, anxiety and the performance of students.

Introduction

In higher institutions of learning, there are various factors that hinder the performance of students. These factors could be social, psychological, and environmental. Students are able to master the necessary skills and competence if they are in a psychological and social comfort zone. Higher learning institutions can not realize their lofty objectives without analysis of students who join institutions. Thus, an inventory of student interpersonal behavior and psychological conditions would help higher learning institutions properly handle human inputs.

Of all the factors that affect the performance of students, teacher-student interpersonal behavior and learners' emotions have subtle effects. This particularly holds true in language classes. For many students, language courses are the most anxiety-provoking courses they take (MacIntyre, 1995, cited in Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). Language anxiety is not exclusive to beginners; university students with an extensive language learning background can also perceive considerable levels of language anxiety (Ortega-Cebreros, 2003). Language classes are a bit different from others; it is full of interactions, tasks and activities in which some people experience psychological blocks like anxiety. That is, the uniqueness of foreign language anxiety in comparison with other academic anxieties lies on the interactive nature of language classrooms and the continual request on learners to communicate (Ortega-Cebreros, 2003).

In addition to the interactive nature of language classes, language learners have dual tasks of not only of learning a foreign language but also using it (Foss & Reilzel, 1991); as a result, language anxiety is more likely to occur in foreign language lessons than in lessons in the other subjects of the curriculum. On top of these, foreign language classes require students to communicate via a medium in which only limited facility is possessed (Horwitz et al., 1991). These additional feelings of incompetence about grasping the language in the first place and about the inability to present oneself in a way consistent with one's self image would induce anxiety (Foss & Reilzel, 1991). This affects the performance of students.

Regarding the effect of anxiety, facilitating and debilitating anxiety have been used by language anxiety researchers. Facilitating anxiety is an asset to learners' performance while debilitating anxiety is detrimental (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Facilitating anxiety keeps students alert and leads to high language proficiency and good grades in language classes; whereas debilitating anxiety may lead to poor performance in speaking (Oxford, 1998 cited in Feigenbaum, 2007).

Anxiety is also classified as being state and trait. State anxiety arises as a temporary condition in response to a particular situation or event; on the other hand, trait anxiety is a relatively stable personality trait which is applicable across a variety of situations (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Oxford, 1998 cited in Feigenbaum, 2007; Woodrow, 2006).

Comparison between state and trait anxiety revealed that it is state anxiety that influences the language learning process (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991 cited in Feigenbaum, 2007). In this regard, it can be said that state anxiety is highly linked with the learning environment. That is, language anxiety is conceptualized by many language anxiety researchers (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004) as a situation-specific trait. In addition to this, Spielberger, Anton & Bedell (1978) cited in Woodrow (2006) added situational specific anxiety, the third type of anxiety, which reflects a trait that recurs in specific situations.

On the other hand, Leary (1982) cited in Ohatu (2005) defined social anxiety as a type of anxiety that arises from the presence of interpersonal evaluation in real or imagined social settings. In relation to this, Horwitz (2001) forwarded that the help and friendship the teacher shows toward students, how much the teacher talks openly with students, trust them, and is interested in their ideas, perceived teachers' support may be possible to reduce the anxiety of language learners. In congruent with this, Turkish students identified their teacher's manner as an important source of anxiety (Horwitz, 2001). In light of the findings above, forming personal relationship with students is helpful in reducing language anxiety.

This indicates that a particular environment that a teacher creates in the classroom may have a tremendous impact on students' emotional reaction- anxiety (Ohata, 2005 citing

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Bailey 1983, Tsui, 1996; Price, 1991 cited in Worde, 2003). Worde (2003) kept on saying that having a relaxed classroom environment as paramount importance in reducing anxiety. In a similar study, Horwitz (2001) citing Palacios's (1998), findings state that it might be possible to keep anxiety levels to a minimum level with a supportive and constructive classroom environment. That is, anxiety decreased when instructors create a warm social environment (Young, 1991).

Needless to say, classroom environment influences affective factors and non-threatening learning environment fosters academic success. Promotion of classroom environment characteristics such as cohesiveness and democracy (Fraser 1986 cited in Finch 2001) and being sensitive to students' affective needs have consistently positive influences on learning. Curriculum, teaching methodologies, materials, textbooks, and assessments rely heavily on narrowly defined academic achievement (Rogers, 1951 cited in Finch, 2001).

By listening to the students as they express their needs, beliefs and perceptions (Reid, 1999 cited in Finch, 2001), the teacher could create conducive environment. Sano et.al, (1984) cited in Finch (2001) noted that even creative production is possible in a "non threatening environment which encourages meaningful learning and the creative use of English. Students give credit for warm – hearted interaction between teachers and learners as well as among learners themselves. This makes teachers consider their basic assumptions and reactions while making interactions with student; having taken off the authoritarian "dispense of correct language" hat, the teacher can begin construction of a dogma-free warning space sensitive to the affective needs of the students (Finch, 2001).

It is the researcher's premise in this study that teacher-student interpersonal behavior could bring deep-rooted emotional effect on today's language classes. This psychological effect, in turn, affects the performance of students. In view of the above points, it is imperative that teachers in general and language teachers in particular have to develop awareness of the phenomenon of language anxiety and the effect of teacher-student interpersonal behavior. To this end, the following research question has been formulated:

- What are the relationships among teacher-student interpersonal behavior, anxiety and the performance of students in language classes?

On the basis of the above theoretical and empirical investigation, the following conceptual framework is developed for studying the relationship among anxiety, teacher-student interpersonal behavior and achievement.
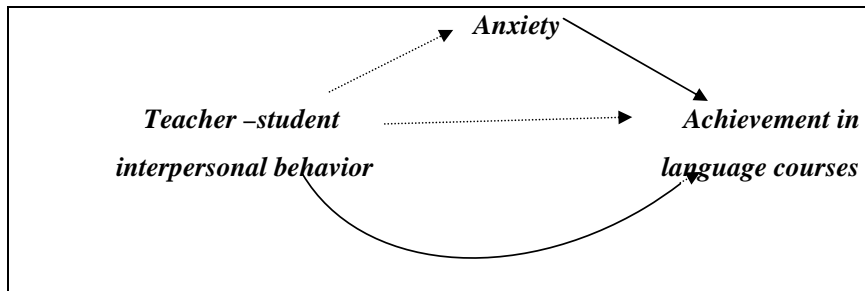

Figure1: *Conceptual framework for studying teacher-student interpersonal Behavior, anxiety achievement*

Source: Adapted from the theoretical and empirical findings discussed above.

Method

This study was done taking St. Mary's University College as a case. The total number of freshman and third year students in the department of Language was about fifty and twenty-two, respectively. Availability sampling technique was used. Since the research was designed to show the possible correlation among anxiety, teacher-students behavior and achievement, the appropriate instruments chosen for the collection of data were questionnaires and document analysis. Two forms of questionnaires which are standardized scales of "language anxiety" and "teacher-student interpersonal behavior" were adapted and distributed to freshman and third year English major students at St. Mary's University College. Students were requested to fill in the questionnaires with 'their language teachers in mind'. The students were also asked to rate the items on a five point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Students' academic performance obtained from the Registrar's Office of St. Mary's University College was also used as a source of data. For the freshman students, first year second semester grade point was taken into account whereas for senior students the last semester grade points was used.

The results were tabulated and analyzed. The analysis was made using inferential statistical measures. The inferential measures were designed to draw strong conclusions about the data. The basic purpose of utilizing inferential statistical analysis was to see correlation among anxiety, teacher-students behavior and achievement. The data collected through questionnaire were analyzed with Pearson Product Moment Coefficient of Correlation. Pearson ' r ' was used at 0.05/0.01 alpha levels.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Correlation between anxiety and achievement

	Level of anxiety					
	Low		Medium		High	
	Fresh	**senior**	**fresh**	**senior**	**Fresh**	**senior**
Language Course GPA	.638**	.138*	.548**	.228	-.604*	-.704*

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As it can be seen form the table above, when the level of anxiety became at a low or medium level, a positive relationship existed between the levels of anxiety and the achievement of students in the language course. The correlation was moderate and little for freshman and senior students respectively. This correlation was found to be significant at 0.01 levels for the case of freshman students. That is, the observed t-value for anxiety and achievement in language course is less than the appropriate t- critical value for acceptance. Hence, the achievements of students in language courses and anxiety, in this study are correlated significantly. It has been said that second or foreign language learning is anxiety- provoking. As a result, students might experience mild, moderate or severe anxiety in the process of language learning. However, a high level of language learning anxiety might become detrimental to performance and students are less bold and find it difficult to think clearly (Argaman and Abu-Rabia, 2002; Brown, 1994; Ohata, 2005b; Crookall and Oxford, 1991). That is, there is a tendency for students to experience mild anxiety while their performance tends to increase. This indicates that the

amount of anxiety experienced by students could not exceed the norm and hinder the students' ability. This further implies that the optimal level of anxiety could not impede language learning process; instead, it facilitates the stages of acquisition. This was, of course, in line with the well established fact that facilitating anxiety motivates learners to emotionally 'fight' their learning tasks. In contrast, debilitating anxiety motivates the learner to 'flee' from the new learning task (Scovel, 1991).

As it can be seen from the table above, when the level of anxiety became high, there was a negative correlation between anxiety and the achievement of students. The observed t-value for anxiety and achievement was found to be significant at 0.05 showing that there was statistically negative significant correlation between anxiety and achievement. That is, while students were scoring better in the English course, they were ranked lowest on anxiety score. This further revealed that maximum level of anxiety might hamper the performance of students.

Table 2: Correlation among teacher-student interpersonal behavior, anxiety & achievement

	Teacher-student interpersonal behavior	
	Fresh	**senior**
Level of anxiety	-.228	-.830*
Language Course GPA	.383*	.853**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The above table also showed that there was a negative correlation between anxiety and teacher-student interpersonal behavior (-.830; -.228); and the correlation was high up on senior students (-0.830) and low on freshman students. This high correlation was found to be statistically significant. This depicted that when teacher-student interpersonal relationship became healthier, the amount of anxiety students experience was lower. Still, the possible reasons might be the degree of acquaintance. The more students stay in the University College, the better relationship they form with teachers; and this in turn

reduces the level of anxiety. Staying long in the University College, in the case of senior students, enabled them to develop desirable teacher-student interpersonal behavior.

On the contrary, as can be seen from Table2, the level of correlation between teacher-student interpersonal behavior and anxiety was found to be (-.228) in the case of freshman students. This indicated that freshman students entering higher learning institutions might not have desirable teacher-student interpersonal behavior. This happened due to the fact that they became strange to the learning environment in general and with teacher-student interpersonal relationship in particular and this might make them experience psychological discomfort. Thus, the learning environment that recognizes the importance of teacher-student interpersonal behavior is unarguably important so as to reduce psychological instability. Otherwise, this psychological instability would affect the performance of the learners.

In general, teacher-student interpersonal behavior might regulate the level of anxiety that students experience and this might hinder the achievement of students. In a similar study it was reported that Chinese and Indonesian students are not used to asking questions in lectures; Japanese students are reluctant to speak in front of other students (Jiang, 2001). This implied that the teaching-learning interaction is influenced by the teacher-student interpersonal behavior. And this might affect the interaction that should exist in the language class.

It is evident from the above table that there is also a relationship between the performance of students in the language course and teacher-student interpersonal behavior (.383, .853). Still, the relationship was higher on senior students (.853). This discrepancy which existed between freshman and senior students might be due to the fact that senior students owing to their years of stay might develop healthy interpersonal relationship with teachers. As a result, when the performance of students improves, healthy teacher-student interpersonal behavior tends to increase. In other words, healthy teacher-student interpersonal relationships might be a prerequisite for good performance and for engaging students in learning activities. A similar study has shown that students' perceptions of teacher-student interpersonal behavior are strongly related to the

achievement of students (Oord and Den Brok, 2004). Interaction has got a special place in language classes since the peculiar feature of language class is its nature of interaction. In the domain of this interaction, respectful relationships should exist. In this regard, teachers are to be approachable and students have to feel free to ask questions and interact easily so as to exploit their full potential.

In the process of classroom interaction, it is assumed that people send both content and relational signals at the same time, with the latter often determining how the former is understood (Watzlawick, et al.1967 cited in Oord and Den Brok, 2004). In relation to this, teachers having healthy interpersonal relationship with students are seen by students as someone that is a good leader, helps and understands students, provides some responsibility and freedom and is not too strict, is not uncertain, admonishing or dissatisfied with students (Wubbels and Levey, 1993 cited in Oord and Den Brok, 2004).

Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship among teacher-student interpersonal behavior, anxiety and achievement in language classes at St. Mary's University College. To this end, data were collected from both freshman and senior students in the department of languages. Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions are forwarded.

- There was a statistically negative significant correlation between anxiety and achievement while the level of anxiety was high. On the contrary, when the levels of anxiety become low and medium, achievement and anxiety are correlated positively.
- It was found out that there was a negative high correlation between teacher-student interpersonal behavior and anxiety among senior language students. And the correlation was little on freshman language students. This showed that the longer students stayed in the University College, the better teacher-student interpersonal behavior and achievement became. The possible justification might be familiarity of the learning environment. While students are staying in

institutions for a long period of time, they might develop healthy interpersonal relationship with their teachers. Furthermore, staying long in the institutions enables students to be acquainted with the type of tasks they are required to carryout. Thus, if students are accustomed to the task as well as the nature of teacher-student interpersonal behavior, the level of psychological tension would reduce.

- The findings of the study also depicted that there was a positive correlation between the performance of students and teacher-student interpersonal behavior. In general, the finding of this study showed that there were valuable correlations among teacher-student interpersonal behavior, anxiety and students of performance.

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