



**The affective side of the language learner is probably** one of the most important influences on learning success or failure. Learning a second language is a complicated process and involves self-concept and self-esteem like no other subject. Anxiety then “ranks high among factors influencing language learning, regardless of whether the setting is informal or formal” (Oxford, 1990:59), often sabotaging the language learning process.

Anxiety can be defined as feeling of worry, fear or nervousness, and can be accompanied by physical effects such as pallor, sweating, trembling, heart palpitations, fatigue, nausea, chest pain, shortness of breath, stomach aches, or headaches; it can be experienced at a global or situational level. At a global level, trait anxiety is a more permanent predisposition to be anxious; at a more situational level, state anxiety is experienced in relation to some particular situations. Because of its global nature, it is difficult to iden-

tify the influence of trait anxiety in language learning; however research has shown state anxiety is closely related to success in language learning. L2 anxiety is therefore described as a situation-specific anxiety.

### Language Anxiety

Language anxiety can be defined as fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993). Researchers have identified three different components of language anxiety:

- 1** Communication apprehension occurs when learners with immature communication skills try to express mature thoughts and ideas in appropriate ways. Students who suffer from communication apprehension are reluctant to interact with others in class.
- 2** Fear of negative social evaluation which originates from the learner’s

# Busting Student Stress

*Carmen Gloria Garrido Barra* offers advice on how to reduce anxiety in the language classroom

from a global trait or if it comes from a particular situation in class to help them control their emotions and attitudes about learning, and achieve tasks successfully.

Zoltan Dörnyei (2001) suggests establishing a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom to reduce language anxiety. According to the author, there are elements that need to be considered to create a supportive psychological environment in the classroom:

**Teacher's rapport with the students:** Students are more motivated when teachers are emphatic, have personal interactions with them, and establish relationships of mutual trust and respect with the student. The development of a personal relationship with the students includes the teacher's acceptance of the students, ability to listen and pay attention to them, and availability for personal contact. It is also important students feel tests and assessment are "transparent," and that the teacher involves them in the negotiation of the final grade.

**Students' relationships with each other:** When students are happy to belong to a group, they share an increased responsibility for achieving the group goals.

**The norm of tolerance:** If the teacher establishes a norm of tolerance, students feel comfortable taking risks because they know they will not be embarrassed or criticized if they make a mistake. This element helps to encourage risk taking and have mistakes accepted as natural part of learning.

**Physical environment:** We must remember the classroom is not only a psychological but also a physical environment, and the classroom atmosphere is strongly influenced by decoration. The most important thing, however, is the extent to which the students are involved in personalizing the classroom. Learners should be encouraged to personalize the classroom environment, and have some control over the walls, spatial arrangement of the furniture, and background music.

Rebecca Oxford (1990) also suggests strategies to lower anxiety. Each strategy has a physical component and a mental component.

**Using Progressive Relaxation, Deep Breathing or Meditation:** To lower anxiety students can use different techniques: the technique of alternatively tensing and relaxing all of the major muscle groups in the body, the technique of breathing deeply from the diaphragm, or the technique of meditating

need to make a positive social impression on others. It is an apprehension about the evaluation of others. In the language classroom, this is observable in behaviours such as keeping silent, responding only when necessary, being passive, and avoiding class entirely.

**3** Test anxiety or apprehension over academic evaluation is "the tendency to become alarmed about the consequences of inadequate performance on a test or other evaluation" (Sarason, 1984). There are some factors that have an influence on students' reactions to language tests. These are perceptions of test validity, time limit, test techniques, test format, length, testing environment, and clarity of test instructions (Young, 1999). Students with test anxiety frequently experience cognitive interference (Sarason, 1984), and have a difficult time focusing on the task at hand (Aida, 1994).

## What can be done to reduce anxiety in class?

Teachers should try to determine whether a student's anxiety originates