

# Anxiety in Language Learning

## What does Anxiety look like?

Mary found class difficult. Reading out dialogues and drills after the teacher wasn't too difficult, but when having to say something in front of the whole class, she often got stage fright and performed badly.

John knew it was best to get out on the street and practice what he had learnt in class. However, when outside and seeing someone just about to talk to him in Chinese, he would freeze and found it difficult to grasp what they were trying to say.

Whether it's the thought of standing up in front of a large audience (or even waiting nervously to attempt our first parachute jump!), there are times when we all feel anxious to some degree or other.

Some of the signs or symptoms of anxiety are: **physically**, we may have butterflies in our stomach or feel our heart beating faster; **psychologically** we may feel frightened or panicky. We start to have anxious thoughts about the very real possibility of making a complete fool of ourselves (again!) and the consequent loss of face that this will bring. We don't like to be thought of as a failure.

But the real problem with anxiety is that, in order to avoid feelings of discomfort – feeling frightened or a sense of failure – we may choose to *avoid* situations which have the potential to cause us discomfort and rather stay in the safety of our own homes. But the result of avoidance is that it can gradually reduce our self-confidence.

We need to understand that our level of self-confidence is much more vulnerable than we often think it is. We rely on relationships to foster positive feelings about ourselves, so any breakdown in these relationships can significantly affect our self-esteem. Furthermore, when we start to *avoid* situations, our guilt increases, anxiety worsens, and we are more likely to avoid other similarly potentially anxiety-producing situations.

## How does anxiety affect Language Learning?

Research has shown that two of the key factors which relate to success in language learning are:

- a. Self-confidence and a good self-image (i.e. belief in our own capability).
- b. Low anxiety.

It is important, therefore, to understand how anxiety and low self-image interact to negatively affect progress in learning a foreign language, how certain personality traits increase anxiety, and how anxiety hinders recall.

As regards the language learner's **self-image**, anxiety can affect us both internally and externally.

*Internally – regarding feelings about myself* – I'm concerned that I might lack the capability needed to learn Chinese ("I've never been any good at languages – and this just proves it once and for all!!").

*Externally – regarding my feelings about interacting with other people* – I'm concerned what they might be thinking of me. "He's so dumb – he can't even say one simple sentence correctly!" – and the consequent shame and loss of face that this brings.

Those with higher self-esteem are more able to withstand threats to their existence and thus their defenses are lower. Those with weaker self-esteem maintain walls of inhibition to protect their fragile ego or lack of self-confidence. However, these walls or defenses hinder language learning, and their removal involves self-exposure to a degree required in few other tasks. This can make certain language learners very anxious.

Learning Chinese may, therefore, be seen as an affront to our self-esteem. It can be an extremely humiliating experience struggling with mastering new sounds and grammar patterns. We don't wish to be seen as 'jabbering idiots'. And so adult language learners may try to keep their self-esteem afloat (i.e. maintain 'face') by avoiding risk-taking or by rationalization ("I need to spend more time writing

those Chinese characters") – defense mechanisms by which our ego protects its own self-image.

Anxious students feel a deep self-consciousness when asked to risk revealing themselves by speaking the language in the presence of other people. As mature adults, we don't like being laughed at or making a fool of ourselves in public. The feeling of using a new language can be like that of wearing fancy dress. Children do not fear fancy dress – in fact they enjoy wearing it. Adults vary tremendously – some feeling very self-conscious. However, the more childlike an adult language learner can be, the more easily they can learn a new language.

As adults, we can get very upset and frustrated when, even after several months of learning Chinese, we are still unable to communicate even fairly basic ideas. As one student said, "You feel frustrated and humiliated because you know you are an interesting adult and yet you sound like a babbling baby." You think to yourself, "I'm an intelligent adult, I've mastered other subjects with relative ease, so I should be able to master Chinese too, but I can't." The discrepancy between effort and results can be very frustrating.

Certain **personality traits** may increase anxiety in language learning. Perfectionists are often too hard on themselves when they fail to master some point of the language. Their critical self is forever punishing their performing self: "You know you ought not to still be making such elementary mistakes!" Then another type of person is the one who is overly concerned about what others think of them and how they are performing. They can feel very self-conscious when trying to master a difficult language like Chinese. When they fail to grasp some aspect of the language in, according to *their* standards, an appropriate period of time, they feel very inferior, resulting in a lowered self-image.

A basic problem which can intensify our anxiety is that, when we are anxious, a barrier goes up which impedes the flow into and out of the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition. We know that we know the word, but are surprised that we **failed to recall** it at the vital moment. The feeling of anxiety and sense of failure which

follows can be debilitating for the nervous student. As one linguist put it, "Their anxiety brings on the very failure which so concerns them."

## **What can be done to alleviate the debilitating effects of anxiety?**

### **A. The Classroom**

Is the classroom a safe and secure place for learning Chinese or is the teacher's approach to teaching the language causing us to feel anxious?

In one approach to language teaching (Community Language Learning), the teacher takes the role of a counselor and the student is the counselee or client. So instead of the teacher being the stern all-knowing authority figure before whom we quake and tremble lest we make the slightest mistake, rather she becomes the counselor who wants to encourage us to take bold steps in faith in a safe and secure environment where we won't be jumped on or laughed at for the slightest mistake. This avoids 'defensive learning' where the student, in order to avoid humiliation and embarrassment, hides behind defense mechanisms for protection of their self-esteem (e.g. not volunteering to answer the teacher's questions for fear of answering incorrectly and feeling humiliated). With Community Language Learning, the 'natural child' in us – creative, spontaneous, curious, free of fear – is therefore allowed to emerge freely and openly, not being under the parental gaze of the critical teacher. Instead, it rests in an accepting warmth and understanding where defensive learning is unnecessary.

Teachers therefore play a significant role in the amount of anxiety students experience. If your teacher is making you unduly nervous, excuse yourself from his or her class and study with a tutor. If you are easily anxious, you need teachers who are more like friends helping you to learn and less like authority figures goading you to perform.

### **B. The Community**

In order to try to alleviate the debilitating effects of anxiety, we can:

- i. **avoid** potentially embarrassing situations. Sometimes, this is sensible, e.g. a crowded post office! However, if this results in

our staying indoors and hardly having any contact with local people, it will hinder progress, make it harder to go out later on, and create guilt feelings as we know what we *ought* to be doing!

- ii. try jumping in at the deep end by **forcing** ourselves to go outside to search for people with whom we can practice the language. However, this can take away all the joy in learning the language as "going out to practice" becomes a daily dread, and everyday ends with memories of failure which in turn increase our anxiety.
- iii. **create safe and secure places** for practicing Chinese where it is okay to make mistakes, where our defenses can come down, and where we won't be humiliated or embarrassed. All language learners make mistakes. Lots of mistakes. It's just that the anxious student feels so bad about making them while others don't seem to mind so much!

Anxious language learners have a great fear of public embarrassment – making a fool of themselves in front of other people. So they need to find some friendly Chinese with a gentle, empathetic personality where, in a safe and secure environment, they can do what they so desperately want to do – communicate in Chinese. If you have difficulty finding the right person, maybe a colleague can help you find someone.

We also need to adjust our expectations as to how soon we ought to be mastering the language. We are all going to make mistakes, and we need to see that errors are a useful source of information about the language. So try not to feel so bad when you don't get it right the first time (– or the one-hundred-and-first time, for that matter!).

It is also helpful to look for stallholders and shopkeepers who are warm and friendly and shop with them. Your colleagues should be able to help you locate these people. We all have to purchase daily necessities, and these people will make the experience more enjoyable for us.

Another, somewhat extreme suggestion is to buy a pet – goldfish, cat, dog – and talk to it in Chinese. Very non-threatening!

## Summary

In order for you to understand what is going on inside you, you need to analyze your fears and develop a personal strategy for overcoming them. There is no point in telling yourself not to be anxious! Rather, you should be spending time with people who have a gentle, warm and non-threatening personality. These people provide a safe and secure environment where you feel relaxed and are able to talk freely and confidently.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. Concerning my self-image: How do I feel about myself and my capabilities? In particular, how do I feel about my capabilities as a language learner? On what do I base these feelings?
2. Concerning inhibition: Do I feel easily inhibited and defensive about learning another language? If so, can I identify what I'm afraid of, or what I am protecting?
3. Concerning anxiety when interacting with others: How much am I willing to become as a little child? In what situations do I most easily feel threatened or embarrassed?