



Identity-Based Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate in the ESL Classroom

T. Sharkawi

Abstract

It is axiomatic in any ESL learning context that helping language learners in increasing their investment in the language and encouraging their willingness to take risks is indispensable for successful language learning. Affective factors such as motivation and anxiety have been shown to have an impact on the ability of students to learn. Unwillingness to communicate in the ESL classroom; and therefore lack of investment in the target language, could emanate from a shift in language identity caused by language anxiety. To help learners overcome this unwillingness and therefore further their progress in the language classroom, reasons of lack of investment and unwillingness to communicate in relation to language identity should be identified. The patterns and sources of identity-based anxiety play a crucial role in this area, particularly when literature suggests that pedagogical decisions for ESL students should consider affective factors such as identity and investment. Research showed that changes in the pedagogical practices reflected in assessment, nature of tasks, and even classroom furniture can also have a massive impact on identity-based anxiety.

The topic of language identity has been thoroughly researched in second language acquisition since the 1980s. Le Page and Taboret-Keller [1] pointed out that we all engage in acts of identity through the use of language, which reveals similarities and differences about our personal, social, and ethnic identities. Common language is a strong tie that preserves affiliation with our group, a larger context from which we derive our identity [2]. Placed in an ESL context, the language learner, who is not a proficient foreign language user, feels that the tie weakens; hence feels that his or her identity is threatened. Eventually, the language learner shows less engagement in acts of identity by speaking less inside the classroom and becoming unwilling to communicate.

It cannot be ignored how anxiety and identity are both at play in the language-learning classroom. Whereas competence-based anxiety may lead to the learners' difficulties in language acquisition, the concept of identity-based anxiety is required to be observed as an essential element contributing to poor English acquisition [3]. While in the former form of anxiety learners still show a pattern of adequate communication [2], the latter form of anxiety displayed a major tendency toward minimized communication [3]. Therefore, it becomes indispensable to discuss learners' willingness to speak English in within the context of affiliation (identity) [4]. The need to investigate the relatedness of identity-based anxiety and willingness to communicate and their consequences emerges and is addressed in this research.

References

- [1] Le Page, R., & Tabouret-Keller, A. (1985). *Acts of identity: Creole-based approaches to language and ethnicity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Nero, S. (2005). Language, identities, and ESL pedagogy. *Language and Education*, 19(3), 194-211.
- [3] Stroud, C., & Wee, L. (2006). Anxiety & identity in the language classroom. *RELC*, 37(2), 299-307.



[4] MacIntyre, P., Dorneyi, Z., Clement, R., & Noels, K. (1998). Conceptualization and willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(4), 545-562.