Language Learning and Perfectionism: Anxious and Non-Anxious Language Learners’ Reactions to Their Own Oral Performance

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This interview study sought to clarify the relationship between foreign language anxiety and perfectionism. The comments of anxious and non-anxious language learners were audiorecorded as they watched themselves interact in a videotaped oral interview. By examining the reactions of the language learners to their actual oral performance and analyzing the audiotapes for instances of perfectionism, evidence was gathered suggesting that anxious and non-anxious learners differ in their personal performance standards, procrastination, fear of evaluation, and concern over errors. Because the results of this study indicated a link between language anxiety and perfectionism, the article ends with a discussion of procedures that have been used to overcome perfectionism and that may also be helpful to anxious foreign language learners.

LANGUAGE TEACHERS AND RESEARCHERS have been interested in the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety for a number of years. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) argued that foreign language anxiety is a specific syndrome that may be related to three well-known anxieties associated with first language use and everyday life. These are: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Communication apprehension refers to an individual’s discomfort in talking in front of others. In the foreign language context, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) contended that the mismatch between foreign language students’ mature thoughts and their immature foreign or second language proficiency results in self-consciousness and anxiety in some individuals. The inability to express oneself fully or to understand what another person says can easily lead to frustration and apprehension given that the apprehensive communicator is aware that complete communication is not possible and may be troubled by this prospect.

In the case of foreign or second language learning, fear of negative evaluation is likely to be manifested in a student’s overconcern with academic and personal evaluations of his or her performance and competence in the target language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Although it is axiomatic that language learning cannot occur without errors, errors can be the source of anxiety in some individuals because they draw attention to the difficulty of making positive social impressions when speaking a new language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). People who are highly concerned about the impressions that others form of them tend to behave in ways that minimize the possibility of unfavorable evaluations. Like communication-anxious individuals, people who fear
negative evaluation rarely initiate conversation and interact minimally. Language students who experience this anxiety tend to sit passively in the classroom, withdraw from activities that could increase their language skills, and may even avoid class entirely (Ely, 1986; Gregersen, 1999/2000; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

The construct of test anxiety also seems relevant to a discussion of the anxious foreign or second language learner. Some learners may inappropriately view foreign or second language production as a test situation rather than as an opportunity for communication (Horwitz, 1986).

Although the constructs of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety have proven useful in understanding the nature of foreign language anxiety, relatively little is known about the relationships between and among foreign language anxiety and other personality characteristics. Understanding these relationships would help teachers better understand the experience of uncomfortable language learners and point to better ways to help these students. This article will, therefore, examine the relationship between foreign language anxiety and a logically related personality construct, perfectionism.

Communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety evoke an image of a language learner who is overly concerned with the “appearance” of his or her communication attempts. Like anxious foreign language learners, perfectionists set excessively high standards for performance accompanied by overly critical self-evaluations (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). With respect to language learning, perfectionist students would not be satisfied with merely communicating in their target language—they would want to speak flawlessly, with no grammatical or pronunciation errors, and as easily as a native speaker. Rather than demonstrating less-than-perfect language skills and exposing themselves to the possible negative reactions of others, perfectionist language learners would likely prefer to remain silent, waiting until they were certain of how to express their thoughts. Such impossibly high performance standards create the ideal conditions for the development of language anxiety.

Based on Pacht’s (1984) conceptualization, Brophy (1999) catalogued a number of symptoms of perfectionism in students that seem to be counterproductive to learning of any kind and especially so for language learning:

1. Performance standards that are impossibly high and unnecessarily rigid;
2. Motivation more from fear of failure than from pursuit of success;
3. Measurement of one’s own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment;
4. All-or-nothing evaluations that label anything other than perfection as failure;
5. Difficulty in taking credit or pleasure, even when success is achieved, because such achievement is merely what is expected;
6. Procrastination in getting started on work that will be judged; and
7. Long delays in completing assignments, or repeatedly starting over on assignments, because the work must be perfect from the beginning and continue to be perfect as one goes along. (p. 1)

Other symptoms commonly observed in perfectionist students include an unwillingness to volunteer to respond to questions unless they are certain of the correct answer, overly emotional and “catastrophic” reactions to minor failures, and low productivity due to procrastination or excessive “start overs.”

Although perfectionism is intuitively recognized by many teachers and helping professionals, psychologists have tended to consider it in association with other psychological traits. Pacht (1984) argued that perfectionism plays a prominent role in several forms of psychopathology, and several theorists believe that it is a less exaggerated form of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) (Mallinger, 1984; McFall & Wollersheim, 1979; Pittman, 1987a, 1987b; Salzman, 1968). 1 Recently, however, several researchers have raised the possibility that perfectionism, like anxiety, can itself be an important source of poor school performance. In his book, Teaching Problem Students, Brophy (1996) argued:

Perfectionists show unsatisfactory achievement progress because they are more concerned about avoiding mistakes than about learning. They are inhibited about classroom participation and counterproductively compulsive in their work habits. (p. 112)

Readers familiar with the literature on foreign language anxiety are likely to notice a number of parallels from it to these descriptions of perfectionism. It is important to note that as for anxious language learners, the success of perfectionists is often impeded because they spend their energy avoiding mistakes rather than focusing on learning. Not only do they refrain from classroom participation, but they also indulge in compulsive behaviors that negatively influence their work habits (Brophy, 1999). Brophy’s descriptions of perfectionists evoke several items on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986), an instrument used to identify
language-anxious students. Anxious foreign language learners agree with statements such as, “Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.” “The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.” “I get nervous when I don’t understand every word my language teacher says.” “I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.” Conversely, anxious foreign language students disagree with statements such as, “I don’t feel pressure to prepare very well for my language class.” And “I don’t worry about making mistakes in language class” (Horwitz et al., pp. 129–130).

Brophy’s (1999) suggestion that perfectionist students set overly high performance standards that are accompanied by a fear of failure is reflected in MacIntyre and Gardner’s anxiety model (1991):

Thus, foreign language anxiety is based on negative expectations that lead to worry and emotionality. This leads to cognitive interference from self-derogatory cognition that produces performance deficits. Poor performance and negative emotional reactions reinforce the expectations of anxiety and failure, further anxiety being a reaction to this perceived threat. (p. 110)

Although the preceding analogy between foreign language-anxious and perfectionist students is appealing, no study has examined the connection between these two traits. This interview study, therefore, sought to clarify the interaction of language anxiety and perfectionism in a group of language learners. Specifically, we attempted to identify instances of perfectionism in anxious language learners and confirm that such reactions are less prevalent in non-anxious learners. Thus, in order to examine the relationships between perfectionism and language anxiety, the comments of anxious and non-anxious language learners were audiorecorded as the students watched themselves participate in a videotaped oral interview, and the audiotapes were examined for instances of perfectionism. By having the participants review their videotaped interviews, this study also examined the reactions of language learners to their actual oral performance, a second area that has never before been explored.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

For this interview study, the researchers selected 8 students from a larger group of 78 students who were enrolled in second-year English language classes at the Universidad de Atacama in Chile and who were participating in a quantitative study exploring the relationships between perfectionism and foreign language anxiety. This sample consisted of the 4 most anxious and the 4 least anxious participants in the larger study according to their scores on the FLCAS. Table 1 displays the mean FLCAS scores for the 78 participants in the quantitative study and the scores for the 8 individuals participating in the study reported here.

The 8 participants were second-year students in the English Education program at the Universidad de Atacama. They had completed at least 6 years of secondary English language studies before entering the university the previous year, and they were preparing to become high school English teachers. Of the 8 participants, 7 were female and 1 was male (high-anxious student No. 3). This gender ratio of 1:8 was consistent with the general population of students in the English Education program at the Universidad de Atacama. In addition, 7 of the participants were of typical university age and 1 (low-anxious student No. 3) was a returning adult student. After completing the FLCAS, the 8 students were asked to participate in the interview phase of the study, and all agreed.

Procedures

The interview study reported here consisted of two phases. In the first phase, participants were videotaped in a one-on-one oral interview designed to elicit a sample of their conversational English ability. The oral interviews, conducted by the first author, lasted about 5 minutes during which the participants were asked to respond in English to common conversational prompts:

| TABLE 1 |
|------------------|------------------|
| **FLCAS Scores** |                  |
| Mean FLCAS Score | 58.28            |
| Standard Deviation | 14.81           |
| High-Anxious Student No. 1 | 34         |
| High-Anxious Student No. 2 | 37         |
| High-Anxious Student No. 3 | 41         |
| High-Anxious Student No. 4 | 41         |
| Low-Anxious Student No. 1  | 101        |
| Low-Anxious Student No. 2  | 100        |
| Low-Anxious Student No. 3  | 97         |
| Low-Anxious Student No. 4  | 92         |

*Note. Low scores represent high anxiety; high scores represent low anxiety.*
1. Where are you from?
2. Tell me about your family.
3. How do you celebrate Independence Day?
4. Where do you go and what do you do on vacation?
5. How do you normally spend your weekends?

The videotaped conversations were used in the second part of the study to elicit the students’ possible feelings of perfectionism and anxiety as well as any other emotional reactions. (An effort was made to put participants at ease during both phases of the study.) For rating purposes, perfectionism was operationalized as comments reflecting high personal performance standards and procrastination, fear of evaluation, and error-consciousness. After all 8 students had completed the conversation task (a period of about 1 week), they were invited to review their videos with the first author, and again, all agreed. In this part of the study, the participants watched their videotaped interviews and were asked to reflect on their own performances. The students were given the option of making comments while the video was playing, or of commenting at the end of the video, and, with only one exception (low-anxious student No. 3), the interviewees opted to comment after viewing the entire interview. (We note that several interviewees groaned or made other noises while watching the videotape.) This phase of the study was conducted in the students’ native Spanish. When the videotape ended, the interviewer prompted the students with such questions as “What do you think of your performance?” “Did you like it?” Thus, in order to elicit potentially perfectionist and uncomfortable reactions from them, the interviewer gave the participants a somewhat evaluative orientation to their performance. Although some of the students needed prompting at the beginning, all of the participants readily offered their reactions to the tapes. These sessions lasted about 10 minutes.

The students’ reactions to their conversations were audiorecorded and transcribed. Each transcription was then analyzed independently by three raters fluent in Spanish and familiar with the literature on perfectionism who catalogued indications of perfectionist or nonperfectionist tendencies as defined by Brophy (1999). Specifically, the raters were asked to look for student commentary and reactions reflecting personal performance standards, procrastination, emotional responses to evaluation, and error-consciousness. The raters were requested to excerpt from the complete texts any quotations that they perceived as corresponding to perfectionist or nonperfectionist tendencies. The transcripts were presented in random order, so that the raters, although aware that this was an anxiety study, would be blind to the anxiety status of the participants. Only those quotations that appeared on two or more raters’ lists are included in the ensuing discussion. Table 2 categorizes and summarizes the number of perfectionist comments identified for each of the 8 participants. As can be seen in the table, the number of perfectionist comments offered by the more anxious participants ranged from 7 to 11, whereas the low-anxious students offered only one or two such comments. In addition, of the three comment categories, it is interesting to note that the large majority of comments were judged to be of the personal performance standards and procrastination type.

In order to triangulate these results, the three raters were also asked to put the transcripts in rank order from the most perfectionist (1) to the least perfectionist (8). Table 3 compares the perfe-

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Personal Performance Standards and Procrastination</th>
<th>Fear of Negative Evaluation</th>
<th>Concern Over Errors</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High-Anxious Student No. 1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low-Anxious Student No. 4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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tionism rank order with the rank order of anxiety taken from the FLCAS scores. Raters agreed on the rankings 92% of the time.

**STUDENT REACTIONS TO THEIR ORAL PERFORMANCE**

**Personal Performance Standards and Procrastination**

Unusually high personal standards and procrastination are hallmarks of perfectionism (Brophy, 1999). Perfectionist students often demonstrate long delays in completing assignments or repeatedly restart them because they believe that their work must be perfect from beginning to end. Thus, low productivity is strongly associated with perfectionism, and for that reason, the two issues will be discussed together here.

The anxious students in this study offered a number of comments that are consistent with the high-standard–low-productivity association described by Brophy. Strikingly, unlike the less-anxious students whose comments will follow, the anxious participants in this study were clearly reluctant to comment directly on their oral performance and instead quickly turned the discussions of their videotapes to more general discussions of how they often put off assignments and other language-related tasks. For example, high-anxious student No. 1 ignored her performance on the tape almost entirely and began to discuss when she should take a particular class, saying, "If I am not going to do it [the class] well, it would be better for me to wait until next year and do it better." Later, with reference to a paper she was not satisfied with, she commented, "Why should I turn in something bad if I could have done it well? It’s better not to do it then. I always do this, and then I get frustrated, and I end up staying that way." High-anxious student No. 4 exemplified how procrastination and low productivity result from unrealistic personal standards, "Because I am very slow in doing things, I begin to get nervous about it, and I start to look at all the details. And then I begin to waste a lot of time." Thus, not only did these anxious learners report avoidance and procrastination in their language learning, but they actually seemed to avoid talking about their performance on the tape.

The impossibly high and unnecessarily rigid performance standards described by Brophy (1999) are exemplified in the following excerpt from high-anxious student No. 2 who commented directly on her tape. (Even though this student had high language proficiency, she was also highly anxious.) She complained, “I have some problems with verbs, and I still have to improve some things concerning vocabulary. I believe that if I work harder I could meet my speaking goals. But what happens is that I often forget what some things mean.” She repeated several times, “I believe that if I study a little more . . . I believe that if I study a little more . . .” Thus, even though her language proficiency level was particularly high for a second-year student and clearly high for these 8 participants, she was not personally satisfied with her performance.

The non-anxious language students, however, were happy to discuss their performances on the videotapes and readily described personal standards that were more realistic for their levels of language ability. The non-anxious participants recognized that their language production was imperfect but did not demand the same level of accuracy that their language anxious counterparts did. In fact, they often seemed proud of their performance and aware of their own relaxed state. Low-anxious student No. 3 (the returning adult student) whose oral performance was particularly poor stood out in contrast to the

<table>
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<th>TABLE 3</th>
<th>Rank Orders for Anxiety and Perfectionism</th>
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<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Anxiety (Based on FLCAS Scores)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-Anxious Student No. 1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-Anxious Student No. 2</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>High-Anxious Student No. 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>High-Anxious Student No. 4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-Anxious Student No. 1</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low-Anxious Student No. 2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-Anxious Student No. 3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-Anxious Student No. 4</td>
<td>8</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
high-proficiency but anxious student described above. This non-anxious student commented, “I said less than I would have liked to. It [my English] was not very fluent yet, nevertheless, I didn’t feel at all inhibited. Although I don’t like cameras, it’s fun to see myself now on video.”

Low-anxious student No. 4 stated, “I started getting involved in the topic. Sure, I had some gaps when I tried to think of the right word in English and respond, but in the end, I felt relaxed.” This sentiment was also reflected in the comments of a third non-anxious student, “I wanted to say more . . . It was like I had difficulty in finding the words, and this slowed me down, but it wasn’t stressful.” It is interesting that this participant recognized limitations in her language production but did not find it stressful when she had difficulty expressing herself. Rather, she viewed her difficulty in finding words as an impediment to her speed of production.

These comments suggest that although the non-anxious students recognized weaknesses in their language skills, they set realistic personal standards and seemed pleased when considering their own performance in English. Unlike the anxious students, not only did they comment cheerfully on their performance but they did not report either procrastination or work avoidance. There was not a single reference to either procrastination or avoidance of English tasks in the transcripts of the non-anxious learners. The non-anxious learners also seemed to value being relaxed and gave themselves credit for not getting anxious. In fact, unlike the anxious students who recognized that becoming anxious interfered with their performance, these learners seemed to view their lack of anxiety as a kind of success.

Fear of Evaluation

Consistent with conceptualizations of both language anxiety and perfectionism, the high-anxious participants in this study tended to fear the evaluation of their peers and the subsequent possibility of appearing foolish. All 4 language-anxious interviewees commented negatively about their errors and compared themselves negatively with their peers. High-anxious student No. 3 (the male) worried:

I am bothered a little [about my errors] because I get nervous, and I think that the other person thinks that I don’t know how to speak. It happens a lot. I try to pronounce the best I can, and when I try to pronounce better, my pronunciation gets worse, because I get flustered. That is, I get flustered because I sometimes pronounce words badly. I try so hard to pronounce perfectly. For example, I have a classmate who is very calm when he speaks. He gets mixed up sometimes, but he untangles himself quickly. But not me. I get mixed up and then I get even more mixed up. I get into even deeper trouble.

In addition to worrying about how others perceive him, this participant recognized that other learners may also have difficulty speaking English but still remain calm.

High-anxious student No. 2, explaining the anxiety she felt in large groups, commented, “I believe that everyone gets nervous when they have to confront a group and you have to show what you know. This makes me nervous. In reality, a big group is what makes me really nervous.”

Whereas all of the anxious participants commented about perceived evaluation by peers or conversational partners when speaking English, not a single non-anxious participant did so. It appears that perceived evaluation by others is a feeling that clearly distinguishes anxious and non-anxious foreign language learners, and the possibility of looking foolish is an area of great concern to the anxious language learner.

Concern over Errors

The perfectionist tendency to avoid and overreact to errors appeared prominently in the comments of the anxious participants. The 4 anxious students not only noticed errors but lamented them. Anxious participants offered comments such as, “I made so many mistakes talking, grammatically, everything . . . I made a lot of mistakes. They make me nervous” (from the male participant); “I have problems with verbs, and I have yet to improve my vocabulary”; and a simple, “Oh, I made so many mistakes!”

By contrast, only 2 of the 4 non-anxious interviewees commented at all about their errors and, in stark contrast to their language-anxious counterparts, did not seem bothered by them. Low-anxious student No. 1 commented, “I had some grammatical errors, but small ones. I was fine. I am quite fluent and spontaneous. It wasn’t difficult to express myself.” A second participant, low-anxious student No. 2, offered:

It [the interview] seems very good to me. I was very calm and didn’t feel any pressure. I made some mistakes, but not that many . . . there weren’t really too many. When you are talking, you don’t notice the mistakes, or the mistake is immediately corrected, and now I have the opportunity to see myself on video, I notice this.
DISCUSSION

The reactions of the students to their own oral performance indicate that anxious and non-anxious foreign language learners do differ in terms of their self-reports of perfectionist tendencies. Specifically, anxious learners reported higher standards for their English performance, a greater tendency toward procrastination, greater worry over the opinions of others, and a higher level of concern over their errors than the non-anxious learners. These findings indicate that anxious language learners and perfectionists may have a number of characteristics in common and that these characteristics have the potential for making language learning unpleasant as well as less successful for them than for other students. The setting of standards is a necessary step in accomplishing learning goals; however, the reactions of the anxious students to their oral performances demonstrated that they were never satisfied with what they accomplished. The non-anxious students, even though they also set personal standards, allowed themselves to celebrate small victories.

In one way, however, the anxious and non-anxious learners were similar. Both sets of students were able to recognize their errors during the oral interviews, but the anxious and non-anxious students had vastly different emotional responses to similar errors. (The majority of errors made by all participants during the oral interviews were verb tense and preposition errors.) The anxious learners were disturbed by their mistakes, whereas the non-anxious students took them in stride. It may be that anxious and non-anxious students are equally aware of imperfect performance but differ in their reactions to imperfections. It is interesting to note that the anxious participants often attributed their errors to their anxiety, an excuse never offered by the non-anxious learners, who often seemed pleased with their own lack of anxiety. Consistent with the findings of MacIntyre, Noels, and Clément (1997), the anxious learners in this study tended to overestimate the number and seriousness of their errors whereas the non-anxious students tended toward underestimation. In addition, the anxious learners consistently linked their mistakes to the possibility of negative evaluations by others. Clearly, perceptions of evaluation were an important area of difference between the two groups. The anxious participants viewed their performance as being constantly evaluated by teachers and peers whereas the non-anxious not only relied on self-evaluation but generally evaluated themselves positively.

In considering these findings, it is important to note that anxiety and perfectionism can do more than make language learning unpleasant. These findings suggest one possible contribution to the lower foreign language achievement levels found for anxious learners (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Frost, Turcotte, Heimberg, Mattia, Holt, and Hope (1995) found that participants who were highly concerned about their mistakes reported more negative affect, lower self-confidence, and a greater feeling that they should have performed better on the experimental task (which elicited frequent mistakes) than less-perfectionist students. When compared with students who were not as concerned about making mistakes, the perfectionist students reported greater distress regarding their mistakes and rated their mistakes as more important. They also lamented their mistakes to a greater degree and reported greater concern over the negative reactions of others and a greater desire to keep their mistakes a secret. Such an array of negative affective reactions likely contributed to the lower achievement levels of anxious language learners reported in several studies.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The results of this study indicate that language anxiety and perfectionism can have similar manifestations in anxious language learners, a finding that suggests that procedures that have been used to help individuals overcome perfectionism may also be useful in helping anxious foreign or second language learners. It also appears that anxiety and the actual language proficiency levels demonstrated by the students during the interviews were not highly related in these learners. All of the participants were at the same course level, all had been successful high school language learners, and all felt that they had the potential to become English teachers. Yet, 4 of the participants were highly anxious, and 4 reported little if any anxiety. It appears, rather, that anxious and non-anxious learners differ in terms of their reactions to their performance. Thus, awareness of their limitations in the target language does not appear to be a cause of anxiety in all individuals. Both groups of learners recognized the limitations in their language production but had vastly different responses to these limitations. Finally, we suggest that having students watch their recorded oral performance—sometimes referred to as stimulated recall—is useful in the study of affective reactions to language learning.

Several limitations to this study must be noted.
Only a small group of learners in a specific language learning context was examined, which does not make generalizability of the findings possible. It is entirely possible that other language learners in the same or different learning situation would have different reactions. Yet, there were great similarities among the learners in each group, and the comments reported here are familiar to experienced language teachers. We must also consider that perfectionism plays a greater role in anxiety in students at this level than in less advanced learners. In addition, perfect language performance may be of greater concern to people who plan to be language learners than to more typical language learners (Horwitz, 1996). The relationship of perfectionism and language anxiety should, therefore, be examined in a variety of learning groups at various stages of language learning with various learning goals. Finally and most important, it must be noted that this study began with the premise that anxious language learners would show indications of perfectionism, and it was therefore designed to detect instances of this trait. Anxious and non-anxious language learners likely differ in many important ways other than the characteristics examined here. Future studies should address the relationship of anxiety with other personal traits as well as its relationship to students’ ultimate levels of foreign language achievement.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Given that language anxiety may stem from perfectionist tendencies in some students, approaches used to help perfectionist learners may also benefit anxious language learners. Ramirez (1999) argued that perfectionism is the result of a set of unrealistic self-beliefs. Most important, perfectionists believe that some personally-valued goal will be achieved when they are perfect.

For example, “If I do it perfectly, then . . . [I] will finally be accepted . . . [I] can finally stop worrying . . . I will get what I have been working toward . . . I can finally relax.” The flip side of this schema, also subscribed to by perfectionists, is that “If I make a mistake,” there will be a catastrophic outcome (“I will be humiliated . . . I am a failure . . . I am stupid . . . I am worthless”). (p. 33)

In order to overcome these self-defeating thoughts, Ramirez suggested that people identify the misconceptions in such beliefs and work to develop more realistic expectations. Perfectionists must learn to treat their self-beliefs as hypotheses instead of facts. When an individual’s underlying perfectionist beliefs are restated as suggestions, the individual is often better able to consider a current situation in conjunction with other evidence, such as past experiences and the opinions of others, in order to modify questionable beliefs (Ramirez, 1999). Arthur and Hayward (1997) believe that many students who maintain perfectionist standards about the expectations of others have not actually discussed those expectations with the people involved. Students may need help in overcoming their hesitation to discuss performance expectations with the individuals whose opinions they value (family, friends, etc.).

Language teachers may themselves have perfectionist tendencies and inadvertently encourage or develop these tendencies in their students. Indeed, Brophy (1999) found that nagging or criticizing perfectionist students or giving them additional time to complete assignments only encouraged more perfectionism. He suggested instead that teachers try the following:

[1] building a friendly, supportive learning environment;
[2] establishing the expectation that mistakes are a normal part of the learning process;
[3] presenting themselves as helpful instructors concerned primarily with promoting student learning, rather than as authority figures concerned primarily with evaluating student performance;
[4] articulating expectations that stress learning and improvement over perfect performance of assignments;
[5] explaining how perfectionism is counterproductive;
[6] reassuring perfectionist students that they will get the help they need to achieve success;
[7] following through with help, and communicating teacher approval of students’ progress and accomplishments. (p. 2)

Above all, it is important to remember that perfectionist students need help. According to Brophy (1996), teachers may tend to ignore perfectionist students because they do good work and do not cause trouble.

Finally, we offer two suggestions based on our findings in this study. Both the anxious and the non-anxious participants recognized the value of remaining calm while participating in the oral interview. Thus, we suggest that all learners be reminded of the value of controlling their emotional state when speaking the target language. Horwitz (1990) recommended that anxious students visualize themselves relaxing when they make mistakes in the target language. This practice would seem to be particularly beneficial for
perfectionist students who react so strongly to mistakes. It also appears that the non-anxious students value continuing to talk even if they make mistakes. Anxious students could be taught to focus on continuing a conversation (or oral discourse) as a goal in itself whenever they make mistakes. Thus, as an antidote to their overconcern with errors, they should be told that continuation should be given precedence over errors.

Ultimately, perfectionist students need to understand that the classroom is not merely for demonstrating knowledge and skill, but also for gaining it, and that errors are a normal and acceptable part of everyone’s language learning experience.

NOTES

1 Pittman (1987b), for example, proposes a cybernetic model of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder utilizing a control system analogy. It is believed that individuals constantly compare a signal event (e.g., behavior) with a preset criterion (e.g., standard of performance). The difference between the perceptual signal and the criterion is referred to as the “error signal.” A nonzero error signal activates a systemic response to bring the signal and the criterion into a matched state—in other words, to make the behavior match the desired standard. Behavior that does not match the preset criterion is adjusted and repeated. Perfectionist individuals, according to this model, have an excess of control and thus tolerate little or no mismatch between the signal and the criterion. Thus, their error signals are nearly always in a nonzero state, and the perfectionist must constantly attempt to improve performance in order to match his or her overly rigid standard.

REFERENCES


