

Psychological Stress in Language Learning: A Contemporary

View beyond Teaching Methods

Dr. Abdulmuhsen Ayedh Alqahtani^{1*} and Dr. Saad Shajea Alajmi²

1. College of Education, Kuwait University, P.O. Box 13281, Post Code 71953, Kaifan, Kuwait

2. P.O Box 26691, Post Code 13127, Safat, Kuwait

* E-mail of the corresponding author: abdulmuhsen.alqahtani@ku.edu.kw

Abstract

The current paper attempts to identify the role of stress in language learning. To achieve this objective, a critique of relevant literature was done by analyzing the concept of stress and how it can be manipulated to help improve the language learning process. Stress was reviewed in terms of its concept, measurement, resources, and management. The recommendation is that language teachers can deal with language learning stress in learners through a stress toolbox: awareness, observing, and management.

Keywords: language learning, stress.

1. Introduction

Stress is a human phenomenon, and we encounter it in everyday situations. It is unavoidable and; therefore, we cannot escape it, either we like it or not (Kasschau, 1995). Stressors, the factors causing stress, are many, depending on which situation and/or environment an individual exists. For learners, learning as a demanding process is a major stressor for them since they are required to adapt their knowledge and behavior (Woolfok, 1993). When learners cannot meet the requirements for active learning for one reason or another, they feel stressed; and this stress may develop to long-term stress. However, stress is not necessarily a bad thing that we should delete from our life. Stress is not an ache; it is basically a perception.

Stress has both positive and negative effects. Positive stress (eustress) is healthful and necessary to keep individuals alert and occupied. Negative stress (distress), however, produces changes in individuals that can lead to (a) physical illnesses such as headaches, and hypertension; and (b) various behavior problems such as less commitment, and lower achievement. Therefore, stress as a perception we hold about ourselves and the world surrounding us, both effects (positive and negative) can be managed to reduce its unwanted side effects and, instead, to make it a source of challenge. In learning situations, stress, if carefully observed, could be converted to be a catalyst of interesting learning. Among all school and/or college subjects, languages are influenced most by stress as language is a multi-facet and multi-skill subject: interpersonal communication, cognitive and physical skills (Harwood, 2010).

2. What is Stress?

Stress was mainly studied and conceptualized by psychologists, and then was adapted by other scholars in other disciplines. Although it was accordingly defined in various ways, the input of psychologists is still the vivid sources of stress studies. Stress is generally defined as the demand an organism makes to finally adjust, based on a combination between a stimulus and a response that results in an interaction (Brannon & Feist, 2004; Rathus, 2005). That is, stress is the individual's response to stressors, circumstances and events that are believed to be challenging or may be threatening and taxing his coping abilities (Santrock, 2003). It could happen, however, that the demands of stressors made on an individual are not necessarily real; they could be misinterpretations of person/environment transactions (Huffman, 2002; Sarafino, 1994).

Stress can be aroused by several sources around. Sarafino (1994) classified the sources of stress into three general types:

2.1. Sources within the person

Stress is caused by different types of personality. Psychologically, there are two types of personality: Type A and Type B. A Type A personality is obviously competitive, easily aroused, and hard-driven. On the other hand, a person with a Type B personality is relaxed, calm, and easygoing. These two personality types should not be viewed, however, as two a bi-polar dichotomy where learners should be totally either type, but it is something relative. An individual can clearly be, for example, a type A person but not completely.

2.2. Sources in the family

Stress may be the result of serious personal problems such as a parents' divorce, serious illness, or a death in the family. Accordingly, learners might develop long-term stress caused by sources of stress in the family.

2.3. Sources in society or institution

Learners may feel stressed and tired from society or the institution that they belong to. These sources of stress could be either attitudinal where the society or institution hold attitudes toward given phenomena or operational where facilities and other required instruments are not sufficient.

3. Stress Measurement

All individuals experiencing stress can cope differently. It is necessary for everyone, however, to know how to be aware of measure stress, apart from the coping strategies used. Forshaw (2003) suggested three ways to measure stress:

3.1 Self-report Techniques

The self-report technique is the most widely used due to its ease of use. In it, there are catalogue stress on the left and stress scales on the right. Individuals are asked to rate themselves based on their stress. After calculating the scores, the individuals know how much stress they have.

3.2. Physiological Measures

This technique uses electrical equipment to measure levels of hormones in the body. Some physiological changes such as blood pressure, heart rate monitors, respiration rate, or galvanic skin response are used to indicate the intensity of stress.

3.3. Behavioral Measures

This technique is used to observe the behavior of stressed individuals. They are exposed to certain situations and certain behavioral changes such as speech patterns, patience limit and aggression, are recorded.

4. Stress Reactions

When the body is aroused, it reacts immediately due to the adrenal glands. When the adrenal glands are stimulated, they produce hormones and adrenalin. Hormones increase the amount of blood sugar whereas adrenalin causes rapid heartbeat and breathing. Stress reactions have a negative influence on physiology and behavior. In terms of physiology, stress reactions contribute to headaches, insomnia. For the behavioral influence, stress reactions lead to social withdrawal and other behavioral unwanted side effects such as anxiety, anger, and fear. Kasschau (1995) suggested three factors influencing reactions to stress:

4.1. Personality differences

The two types of personality have been mentioned previously: Type A and Type B. Type A personality is more vulnerable to stress than Type B because the former is generally in a chronic state of alertness.

4.2. Social support

Based on its quality, reactions to stress can be adjusted if individuals obtain social support and sympathy from their social circles around them. Friends and family members can reassure the stressed individual that he is valuable and loved by others in order to help him manipulate his stress.

4.3. Amount of stress

An amount of stress refers to overload or underload of responsibilities an individual deals with. An overload or underload of responsibilities corresponds to dissatisfaction. When the individual becomes dissatisfied, his reactions to stress can be unrealistic.

5. Stress Management

Throughout life situations, stress is inevitable and we constantly encounter it. Therefore, it is a must to admit it and deal with rather denying or ignoring it; i.e., to develop coping strategies for better stress management. Based on the published literature, the following suggestions are believed to prepare individuals to deal with stress effectively and keep them in stress-ready condition (for elaboration see, Allen, 2001; Forshaw, 2003):

5.1. Positive attitudes

Positive attitudes facilitate an individual's ability to cope with stress effectively and improve the strength of the body. When holding positive attitudes toward us and the surrounding world, individuals can look at past experiences as challenges, not as bad memories. On the same line, a sense of humor lightens the duties of life.

5.2. Time management

Time management can reduce the feelings of being under time pressures. If an individual uses effective time management techniques, he can be in a better position of achieving due tasks. Forshaw (2003) stated that a healthy person is a person who manages his time well.

5.3. Improving interpersonal communication skills

This technique reflects to what extent an individual is willing to recognize others in order to be recognized. As such, it indicates the self-esteem schemata and the development of social support systems. Stress gets lower when stressed individual effectively communicates with other people as this communication leads to social support.

5.4. Social support

Social support helps individuals cope with stress. According to Rathus (2005), social support covers five factors: *emotional concern* (caring about others' problems and expressing feelings of sympathy, and understanding), *instrumental aid* (facilitating adaptive behavior by using the material supports and services), *information* (encouraging individuals' ability to cope by using advice), *appraisal* (giving and receiving feedback from others about how well one is doing), and *socializing* (conversation, going shopping, meeting someone new, or recreation).

5.5. Self-efficacy expectations

Self-efficacy is the beliefs that an individual can bring about changes and overcome obstacles by his own efforts. This self-efficacy by no means indicates that the stressed individual is absolutely independent of others support; rather, it asserts that social support is not sufficient per se if the individual's self-efficacy is low.

5.6. Assertive behaviors

Assertive behaviors mean behaving in a confident way. Individuals act in their own best interests with legitimate rights. Thus, they assertively describe the problems objectively, express their feelings openly, and ask for what they want in a direct way.

5.7. Controlling irrational thoughts

Irrational thoughts are thought that are based on unrealistic grounds. One of the most common irrational thoughts is retaining others' approval. An individual wants, for example, to express his ideas toward an issue or participate in a discussion, but he feels anxious that his ideas or contributions might not have the approval of the others.

6. Put it Together for the Language Teachers

Having reviewed briefly the relevant concepts of stress so far, it is possible to put them together for language teachers to deal with it effectively. Language as a purely human activity and as an overwhelming means of interpersonal communication, it is a source of stress (Alqahtani & Al-enzi, 2011). Language is unlike other everyday activities that you can do lonely; it is a completely collective phenomenon of life.

Language learning requires reading aloud, making conversation, arguing, expressing inner feeling and ideas, and to make mistakes as well. For those reasons, learners are very likely stressed when they learn and use the language. Teaching methods might be of little use if language teachers do not recognize this and try to coach the learners for managing their stress in order to effectively manage their language learning. To be an effective language teachers, they must be well aware that stress exists and; thus, they have to identify its sources, and then to provide support as possible within legitimate means. Language teachers have to equip themselves with what can be termed as a *stress toolbox*: awareness, observation, and management.

Awareness

A language teacher should increase his awareness of what stress is: its concept, sources, and effects. This awareness can be developed through discovering stress and holding positive attitudes toward stressed learners. Reading authorized resources about stress, attending lectures on stress, discussing with professional people specializing in stress counseling, but to name some, can help deepen awareness of stress. When language teachers encounter stressed learners, they have to admit their stress, not to suppress it.

Observation

Of course no stress awareness is possible without the ability to observe its symptoms. Language teachers should build observing skills to identify stress from other affective phenomena. This observing ability can be built through attending specialized seminars, workshops and training sessions. Observing techniques include recording learners' behavioral and physiological indicators when they are about to experience stress. Moreover, in order to for language teachers to have a formed picture of their learners' modes of responses to stressors, they can use self-report techniques such as short stress inventories at the beginning of each semester.

Management

When the language teacher finds that stress becomes an obstacle, he should start with coaching the learner to focus on shifting his paradigm with respect to stress and language learning. That is, the language teacher should alert his stressed learners that they are not deviated from being normal and the resources of their stress can be anywhere- they not peculiar to them. Then, those learners can be coached to some effective techniques for reducing the negative aspects of stress. On the other hand, positive stress should be encouraged where stressful situations can be seen as opportunities for challenge and commitment through supporting

learners control irrational thoughts, arrange their time and material resources, and keep their persistence to learn the language.

7. Conclusion

Stress is an inevitable part of life, and language learning situations are apparently the situations where stress exists, most likely. Language teaching methods are not enough per se; teachers are also required to go steps beyond the mere presentation of knowledge. Of course, the research on stress done in field of psychology can be of use to language teachers in order to effectively engage learners in the learning process. The most significant role of language teachers with respect stress management is to admit learners' stress and to encourage learners to see stress as a challenge for better learning.

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Dr. Abdulmuhsen Ayedh Alqahtani (BA in ELT, Kuwait University; MA in Computational Linguistics, University of Essex, UK; PhD. in Educational Leadership & Policy Studies, Virginia Tech., USA; PhD. in Applied Linguistics, University of London, UK. He worked as a high school ELT teacher, Kuwait, then worked as a faculty of ELT and ESP in the College of Basic Education, Kuwait, and currently as currently as a faculty of educational management and planning, Kuwait University, Kuwait. Research interests include broad areas of applied linguistics and translation studies, and educational leadership & policy studies. He has various journal and conference publications in the areas of his interests. Dr. Abdulmuhsen Ayedh Alqahtani is a member of some national and international professional societies related to his areas of interests. He is a member as in several academic and professional committees.

Dr. Saad Shajea Alajmi (Diploma of Arts, Teachers Institute, Kuwait; BA in ELT, Kuwait University; MA in Applied Linguistics, Oxford Brooks University, UK; PhD in Education, University of Exeter, UK. He worked as Arts teacher (Arabic Language, Islamic Studies & Social Studies) in primary and elementary schools, Kuwait, then worked as a high school ELT teacher in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, then worked as an ELT teacher in the Industrial Training Institute, Kuwait, and currently as the founder and manager of Horizons Group for Educational Services, and also currently work as a part time ELT instructor in Kuwait University. Research interests include broad areas of Languages learning and teaching, educational studies including policy making, leadership, school environment and learning and teaching motivation. Dr. Saad Shajea Alajmi is a member of some national professional and academic societies and communities related to his areas of interests

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