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COPING WITH STRESS AND ANXIETY WHEN L2 ACQUISITION

This article considers stressors affecting the psychological state of international college students. In addition to the general stress inherent in higher education as such (necessity of meeting certain academic requirements, test taking, a significant amount of educational material, lack of time, competition among classmates, etc.), international students experience additional stressors associated with L2 acquisition (language learning difficulties, cultural differences, fear of losing self-identity, etc.).

The concept of stress was formulated by a prominent Hungarian-Canadian scientist H. Selye. He considered stress to be a non-specific reaction to any demands made on the body which cannot be avoided. Negative effects of stress (low academic performance, sleep difficulties and depressive/anxiety symptoms, smartphone addiction, Internet addiction, suicide attempts) are widely discussed in modern science. Nevertheless, reducing academic stress can increase students' intrinsic motivation and improve learning outcomes. As for L2 anxiety, it can significantly affect academic achievements, so the factors that determine its level (gender, age, fear of negative evaluation, general feeling of anxiety, etc.) are subject to detailed study.

The article analyzes the influence of anxiety on the formation of speaking skills and suggests some teaching techniques that help overcome anxiety and are applicable to L2 teaching, namely, group work (role play within the given contexts) with no explicit control from the teacher and project-based learning which involve completing various communication tasks aimed primarily at the development of speaking skills. By performing such tasks, students have the opportunity to focus on the process and mechanisms of cooperative learning which significantly reduces the foreign language anxiety.

Key words: *academic stress, stressors, foreign language anxiety, L2 learning and teaching.*

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ПОДОЛАННЯ СТРЕСУ І ТРИВОЖНОСТІ ПРИ ВИВЧЕННІ ДРУГОЇ МОВИ

У статті розглянуто фактори стресу, що впливають на психологічний стан іноземних студентів, які навчаються у вищих навчальних закладах. Окрім загального стресу, притаманного навчанню у вишах як такому (необхідність відповідати певним академічним вимогам, тестування, значний обсяг навчального матеріалу, брак часу, конкуренція з одногрупниками), іноземні студенти додатково відчують стрес-фактори, пов'язані з вивченням другої мови (лінгвістичні труднощі, культурні відмінності, страх втрати самоідентичності тощо).

Поняття «стресу» сформулював видатний вчений угорсько-канадського походження Г. Сельє. Він вважав стрес неспецифічною реакцією на будь-які вимоги до організму, уникнути якої не можливо. Негативні наслідки стресу

(низька академічна успішність, проблеми зі сном і симптоми депресії / тривоги, смартфонозалежність, інтернет-залежність, спроби самогубств) широко дискутують у сучасній науці. Водночас зменшення академічного стресу може збільшити внутрішню мотивацію студентів, покращити результати навчання. Щодо тривожності під час вивчення другої мови, то вона може значно впливати на академічні досягнення, тому фактори, що визначають її рівень (стать, вік, страх негативної оцінки, загальне почуття неспокою), підлягають детальному вивченню.

У статті проаналізовано вплив стану тривожності на формування навичок усного мовлення та запропоновано деякі педагогічні технології, що сприяють подоланню тривожності і є застосовними для викладання другої мови, а саме групову роботу (рольова гра у заданому контексті) без явного контролю з боку викладача та навчання за методом проєктів, що передбачає виконання різних комунікативних завдань, спрямованих насамперед на розвиток навичок усного мовлення. Виконуючи такі завдання, студенти мають змогу зосередитися на процесі та механізмах спільного навчання, що значно зменшує тривожність, пов'язану з вивченням іноземної мови.

Ключові слова: академічний стрес, стрес-фактори, тривожність, пов'язана з вивченням іноземної мови, вивчення і викладання другої мови.

Introduction. It is generally recognized that stress is an inevitable part of life, and it is increasingly prevalent among college students. There are academic stressors as follows: necessity of meeting grade requirements, test taking, the volume of materials to be learned and the requirements to develop an extensive knowledge base, time management, competition among classmates, job seeking, etc. (Lin et al., 2019); and academic specialization significantly influences self-perception of stressors in students as well (Aniței et al., 2015).

As for international students learning in L2, the process of L2 acquisition is usually accompanied by specific emotional experiences. The source of these experiences can be various aspects of the educational situation mediated by mental characteristics of students (behavioral, psychological, and physiological stress markers such as system stress status, physical activity patterns, nutritional habits, state and trait anxiety can be analyzed (Beltrán-Velasco, 2020).

It is quite clear: when learning a new language, L2 students usually express anxiety, apprehension and nervousness which may originate from learners' own sense of „self”, their self-related cognitions, language learning difficulties, differences in learners' and target language cultures, differences in social status of the speakers and interlocutors, and from the fear of losing self-identity (Hashemi, 2011); they are L2 teachers who play a crucial role in smoothing out the difficulties and helping cope with foreign language classroom anxiety.

Review of literature. The concept of stress was formulated by the Austrian-born Hungarian-Canadian scientist Hans Selye. He viewed physiological stress as a non-specific response to any demands made on the body. Selye believed that no matter what difficulty the body faces, it can be dealt with by two types of reactions: active (or struggle) and passive, in the form of escape from difficulties or willingness to endure them.

According to Selye, stress cannot be understood only as nervous tension that leads to illness. Any effect that is unusual for the body (a feeling of anger, fear, hatred, joy, love, extreme cold or heat, infection,

reaction to medication) can cause stress. Thus, stress is the adaptation of the body to any phenomenon involved, and it is impossible to avoid stressful situations at all. Selye notes it is not necessary, because stress is life itself, and the absence of stress means death. Selye considered the effects that trigger stress response to be stressors, implying that anything is a stressor if it triggers a stress response (Selye, 1974).

Negative impact of stress is widely discussed in modern science: in particular, longitudinal examination of perceived stress experienced by first-year pharmacy students showed its increase over a year, and higher perceived stress was associated with lower academic performance (Spivey et al., 2020); academic stressful situations that correspond to classroom intervention, mandatory work, and doing an exam predict high-level chronic stress associated with sex and age of students (Pozos-Radillo et al., 2014). There is an important role of stress responses in the relationship between sleep difficulties and depressive/anxiety symptoms (Zhang et al., 2020); academic stress can be considered to be a risk factor for smartphone dependence (Wang et al., 2020) or smartphone addiction (Samaha, Hawi, 2016), Internet addiction (Jun, Choi, 2015), and even suicide attempts (Ying et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, reducing academic stress can increase students' intrinsic motivation and reduce their amotivation (Liu, 2015); a reduction in students' stress levels can improve their academic result (Paniagua et al., 2019); positive orientation and perceived teacher and student emotional support can be considered as a negative predictor of foreign language anxiety (Jin, Dewaele, 2018).

Language anxiety can play a significant role in language learning; so, the factors influencing the level of language anxiety (gender, age, years of learning English, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and general feeling of anxiety) are carefully studied (Latif, 2015).

The purpose of this study is to consider the impact of foreign language anxiety on L2 speaking

performance and propose some anxiety-coping techniques applicable to L2 teaching.

Main body of the research. There is a specific type of learning activity that, in the case of stress in learners, cannot even be assessed objectively. This is an oral form of communication when learning a foreign language. The situation of oral communication in an official setting is one of the most stressful. It is well-known that the overwhelming majority of those speaking in front of an audience experience stress. Situations of public communication include speaking with a report or a message, making presentations, oral statements at seminars, colloquia, and speaking performance when test taking.

We can point to a number of problems in L2 speaking performance due to stress, namely an increase in hesitation pauses, semantically irrelevant repetitions, stereotype usage, parasitic words, mismatch errors, interlingual interference, as well as a decrease in vocabulary diversity. Emotional stress and anxiety which accompany test taking reduce the efficiency of speaking and sometimes interrupt it at the setting level. In a stressful situation (depending on the individual characteristics of the student) the speaking rate can either speed up or slow down.

If L2 students improperly prolong or incorrectly localize the pause (stop at the time of the program implementation to find the right word or structure), this may indicate the focus of attention on the form of speaking performance or tension that does not happen during automatic skills. In this case, the student either does not speak a foreign language in the normative volume or is in a state of emotional stress. Mistakes while oral communication can be considered either as the lack of formation of speaking skills (vocabulary development, correctness in structuring sentences, phonemic awareness, fluency in spoken language) or as the presence of academic stress and foreign language anxiety.

Practical experience of teaching L2 shows that the high level of anxiety typical for oral communication between students and the teacher requires the educator to organize teaching in a way that excludes (or minimizes) the stress.

In particular, one of the most optimal form of learning activity with a reduced stress is a group work in the classroom characterized by the absence of explicit control from the formal leader of communication (the teacher); that is so called “hidden control” when the teacher “blend in” with the students and does not demonstrate dominant behavior; role-playing is commonly used. Such an approach can be implemented by proving students the contexts to interact naturally on an equal basis and they are

suggested to jointly solve communication problems; recordings of students’ conversations for both learners’ or teacher’s subsequent analysis can be used.

(Example: *The teacher gives students a task to get ready for a job interview. There are three candidates and one interviewer. The teacher announces the event and “hides away”. The interviewer conducts interviews and finally needs to take a decision. The teacher “appears” to tell the interviewer about the strong points of the candidates to support each of them and simultaneously correct students’ speaking mistakes (if any) and “hides away” again. The final decision is taken by the interviewer and discussed by all the candidates.*) The key feature of natural communication is that students are provided with such contexts in which the implementation of the act of communication in a foreign language becomes an urgent necessity and is highly motivated by the needs of communication.

Besides the group work in the classroom, there are some other forms of group work: student conferences, round tables, excursions (students may take turns acting as a guide), etc. The main condition is that the teacher should not correct students by interrupting the speech act; only help or suggest something, if necessary (recordings for subsequent analysis can be used).

Another anxiety-coping technique applicable to L2 acquisition is project work which focuses on completing communication tasks, so that learners can practice a range of skills, especially speaking. Project-based learning (PBL) widely discussed in academic setting (Behizadeh, 2014; Chen, Yang, 2019; Guo et al., 2020; Park, Hiver, 2017) is traditionally defined as a systematic teaching and learning method, which engages students in complex, real-world tasks that result in a product or presentation to an audience (Chen, Yang, 2019) or as “a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks” (Behizadeh, 2014: 100).

PBL is generally considered an alternative to traditional, teacher-led instruction and is believed to have a medium to large positive effect on students’ academic achievement (Chen, Yang, 2019). There are relatively few works in which project-based L2 learning is carefully described (Park, Hiver, 2017; Romanov, Snigurova, 2017), but it is claimed that since projects are planned, executed, and assessed by students collaboratively, L2 anxiety may be meaningfully transformed by focusing on the learning process and on mechanisms for cooperative learning, so language learning anxiety decreases as a function

of project-based learning; project-based L2 learning helps students develop a previously lacking ideal L2 self, better regulate L2 anxiety, and sustain and consolidate L2 self-efficacy (Park, Hiver, 2017).

Project work can be exemplified by students' presentations on typical situations of everyday interactive context (places of interest, public transport, train stations, cafes and restaurants, etc.). Students have a chance to explore real life and acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for oral form of L2 communication (possible tasks to be done: to order a drink and a sandwich in a bar, ask how much it is and understand the price; to ask for directions in the street and follow them; to get a taxi to a famous place; to leave a message, etc.).

Based on the information obtained through communication with native speakers, the participants of group projects get ready their IT presentations. Project presentations are held as an informal communication with all the teachers and students who wish involved. Humor, jokes are welcome. Students have no fear of mistakes which contributes to the natural course of L2 speaking performance. The teachers working with these students sit among the listeners, laugh at jokes, applaud successful remarks and ask questions on an equal basis with the students; and this fully neutralizes teachers' dominant function.

Project work as a type of educational activity enriches L2 learners with a significant amount of linguistic and socio-cultural information. PBL greatly contributes to the development of students' communication skills, helps them to adapt to foreign language environment, as well as to consolidate host nation stereotypes.

Conclusions. Thus, as the stress is an inevitable part of everyday life and particularly common for college students, it is very important for them to learn how to cope with difficult life situations by themselves. Important coping strategies (to address the physical symptoms of stress) may include good sleep hygiene, self-soothing techniques, healthy diet, regular physical activity and sports.

As for a foreign language anxiety among learners, it is the L2 teacher who has a great share of responsibility for creation of an interactive, comfortable, stimulation L2 classroom. We propose the following anxiety-coping techniques applicable to L2 acquisition: group work (role-playing within the given contexts) without an explicit control from the teacher and project-based learning which are crucial for L2 speaking performance. Psychological state and academic progress of L2 learners depend on a number of factors. L2 teaching techniques employed either increase a foreign language anxiety in students or help cope with it.

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