Anxious language learners can change their minds: Ideas and strategies from traditional psychology and positive psychology

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Most learners with language anxiety actively distrust social situations in which they must interact or perform in front of others in the target language. They anticipate scrutiny and embarrassment. Highly anxious language learners are the center of their own swirling, pressured, negative world, which seems particularly focused on what they believe they cannot do. They are worried about being worried, yet they frequently feel they cannot escape the compulsion to worry. They are likely to experience insidious outcomes, such as reductions in the following: cognition, self-confidence, personal agency, control, willingness to communicate, and ability to express and recognize emotions. Perhaps for less severely anxious learners, there are cases in which anticipatory anxiety is beneficial for (a) stimulation and alertness, (b) the focus of action, and (c) the process of resilience. Because of their negative assumptions and lack of social skills, individuals with social anxiety, which is usually the basis of language anxiety, often use avoidance behaviors, such as wishful thinking, denial, distractions, escapism, giving up, and failing to speak, along with physical symptoms such as perspiring and shaking.

The presenter is a language learning specialist, teacher educator, teacher of traditional psychology, and theorist of positive psychology in language learning. She is aware of the value that traditional and positive psychology offer to our understanding of language anxiety. Although traditional psychology tends to pathologize anxiety, it also offers certain helpful interventions, particularly in the form of cognitive behavioral therapy and associated approaches. Positive psychology, which has arrived relatively recently, offers a host of interventions to alleviate anxiety: the ABCDE macro-strategy, hope-oriented interventions, paradoxical intention, hyper-reflection, situation analysis, and positive self-talk, to name a few. The presenter compares and contrasts traditional psychology and positive psychology and explains how to decide which interventions might be the most valuable in particular circumstances.

Keywords: Anxiety, traditional & positive psychology.