Dealing with silence and language anxiety in the L2 classroom

I command thee thou shalt speak

Mr. Riccardo Amorati  
PhD Candidate and Teaching Associate  
riccardo.amorati@unimelb.edu.au  
University of Melbourne

Ms. Beatrice Venturin  
PhD Candidate and Teaching Associate  
beatrice.venturin@unimelb.edu.au  
University of Melbourne
Expectation
Reality

AWKWARD
SILENCE
Initial perceptions

- Anyone?
- Distracted
- Shy
- Listening
- Thinking
- My answer was said already
- I don't know
What is it that makes them anxious about participating in class?
What strategies can we adopt to minimise the effects of language anxiety in the classroom?
Language anxiety

- It refers to the feeling of apprehension, tension and even fear in situations in which students are asked to use the L2 (Dewaele, 2007)

- Linked to individual self-perceptions (e.g. Onwuegbuzie et al. 1999), cultural and contextual factors (Steinberg and Horwitz, 1986; MacIntyre et al. 1997; Bao 2015; see Gknou et al. 2017 for a recent overview).
Some sources of language anxiety

Worry about being judged by others (peers and teachers).

Counterproductive beliefs about language learning
(Young, 1991, Horwitz, 1988)
Working on us: reducing power imbalances

- Renegotiating our own identity in the classroom
- Incorporating more group activities (e.g. correction in pairs and then in plenum; addressing students in groups and not individually)
Hearing from them: the potential of reflective journals

- Ideal spaces where students can **reflect** on their classroom behaviours and also **give feedback** to the teacher

- Issues
  - Not anonymous
  - Usually presented at the end of the subject.

- Our suggestion
  - Preservation of anonymity
  - Presentation at regular times (ideally from Week 3).
Maximising the potential of language-related activities

Relaxation and anxiety-reducing activities (Wolpe, 1958, Gregersen, & MacIntyre, 2013): the whole class is explicitly asked to reflect on their language-anxiety

Counterproductive: ➔ double pressure “Now they’re asking me to talk about why I don’t want to talk”
Syllabus

Twofold objective:
- Didactic: reinforcing a language structure
- Reflective: students speculating on their language-anxiety triggers + food for thoughts for teachers

In practice

- Italian language, but possibly adaptable to other languages
- Different group activities for Beginners, Intermediate, Advanced students, followed by final de-briefing
Examples

**Intermediate:** conditional. Imagine you need to give suggestions to a friend who is in these situations:

- Your friend doesn’t want to speak in class in front of others.
  - You could talk to the teacher
  - I would ask for advice to other students
- Your friend is upset because the teacher corrected him.
  - I would ask the teacher to give feedback privately and not in front of the class
  - Everyone makes mistakes, so you shouldn’t care about the corrections
- [Students add other situations]
Thank you for your attention!


