

## **Fear of failure among technical and vocational students of Taiwan**

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines the origins of the fear of failure experienced in interpersonal and social contexts by Taiwanese technical and vocational students. The main causes for the phenomenon of fear of failure among technical and vocational students in Taiwan are anxiety relating to language, feeling embarrassed, and having an inferiority complex. In this study, in order to reduce technical and vocational students' fear of failure, the researcher proposed the appreciative pedagogical techniques that focus on positive characteristics, bilingualism, empowerment, and dialogism to build up the students' confidence in language and subject field acquisition. Rather than focusing on students' deficiencies, the practice of appreciative pedagogical techniques empowers students to discover their positive characteristics and create bilingual and dialogical learning environment to increase their confidence.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In Taiwan, there are three levels of technical and vocational education: vocational high schools, junior colleges of technology, and colleges/universities of technology. Vocational high school education aims to train entry-level workers. Junior college education aims to equip students with intermediate level of technical and managerial skills, while colleges/universities of technology aim to cultivate students with professional and leadership skills in the field of technology, engineering and management [1]. With its aim of equipping students with professional skills in order to contribute to the development of the Taiwanese economy and industrial workforce, technical and vocational education plays an important role in the national economic development of Taiwan. However, technical and vocational students have experienced stress and anxiety associated with their fear of failure. The Taiwanese culture and the entrance examination mechanism have overemphasised the correlation of learning achievement with the general education system, which includes senior high school and general colleges/universities. Those with higher academic learning achievement would choose the general education system to further their studies rather than entering the technical and vocational education system [2]. Research has shown that those students studying in the technical and vocational education stream perform less well in terms of learning achievement, hence having low confidence, motivation, and self-esteem in learning [2][3]. Furthermore, being labelled as low achievers, they feel that they are inferior to general high or college/university students [2-5].

### **THE AUTHORITARIAN TAIWANESE CLASSROOM**

The authoritarian Taiwanese/Chinese classroom favours students as passive learners, and the knowledge transmission is in a one-way professor-to-student knowledge flow pattern. In the teacher-centred classroom, students do not have the chance to participate in class discussions and are not encouraged to do so [6][7]. Therefore, pedagogy used in Taiwanese classrooms focus on memorising lessons [6]. For instance, in English reading courses, without focusing on important ideas in the reading, the teachers in Taiwan would like to analyse and translate the grammatical construction of every single sentence or a single phrase with an eye to expecting that students know the meaning of each single word. Unlike the reading exam designed to make students think and criticise, the reading exam in Taiwanese classroom intends to instruct students what to memorise and how to follow teachers' ideas [8].

As mentioned above, technical and vocational students are not good at memorising, hence do not achieve a high learning performance in the Taiwanese entrance exam. It is no wonder that in this traditional instructional routine-checking answers from the previous day's assignments, working some of the homework problems on the board, presenting new materials with examples, and assigning seatwork, students cannot benefit much from the instruction [9].

Consequently, while being not able to answer questions and deal with their homework problems, technical and vocational students cannot be motivated to learn.

The reasons why technical and vocational students cannot participate and concentrate upon class instruction are varied or even unknown. However, it is obvious that these students lack the motivation to learn [2][10][11]. It is obvious that on the grounds of previous learning experience, while learning, technical and vocational students possess low motivation and esteem. Moreover, they experience the anxiety and the fear of failure phenomenon.

## FEAR OF FAILURE PHENOMENON IN TAIWAN

In research investigating the fear of failure experienced by technical and vocational students in relation to the origins in the Taiwanese/Chinese interpersonal and social context, Chao and Wang found that the main causes for the phenomenon of fear of failure among students of Taiwan were: language anxiety, anxiety of feeling embarrassed, and inferiority complex [12]. In order to understand better the fear of failure phenomenon in terms of these anxieties, the researcher used in-depth interviews and participant observations to understand the life experiences of students who had the symptom of fear of failure in class. In order to obtain the information, purposeful sampling was used. A total of 46 students (28 female and 18 male students) at institutes of technology in central Taiwan, who had studied English for at least six years since junior high school, participated in this study. Interviews lasted 60 to 80 minutes. To protect the identities of these students, pseudonyms were used in this study. Through the open-ended, semi-structured interviews, the possible information regarding the fear of failure, learning difficulties and educational problems were elicited. Even though students have learned English since junior high school, the interviews were conducted in Chinese partly to reduce students' anxiety and partly to avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation caused by foreign languages. The results of observations and interviews demonstrated that Taiwanese technical and vocational students did have fear of failure problem in terms of language anxiety, anxiety of being embarrassed, and inferiority complex, which are explained below.

### Language Anxiety

The reason why Taiwanese technical and vocational students are passive and unenthusiastic toward class instruction is partly because of their language anxiety, especially English language anxiety. They worry about making mistakes that would in turn result in laughter and embarrassment. Therefore, these students believe that it would be better for them not to speak unless they are able to speak correctly and give correct answers. Hence, when being asked to guess or express opinions, they would prefer to seek answers that were definitely correct rather than uncertain ones. Without correct answers in mind, they dare not speak in front of the class for fear that they will lose face. After interviews with students, one student said, *I am always afraid that others would laugh at me because of my poor English. The sentences I speak are not always grammatically constructed....* Another student said that, *I am so afraid to speak out in class because I might make a mistake or say something wrong. I know that sometimes the words I pronounce are not clear....* These students are too aware that they are not good speakers. Worrying too much that making mistakes may leave bad impression to teachers and peers raise their anxiety and fear of failure in knowledge acquiring process.

### Anxiety of Feeling Embarrassed

Another reason for causing the fear of failure among Taiwanese students is the anxiety of being embarrassed. They feel embarrassed while speaking up in class because they are afraid to act out physically, to ask others questions, to ask for help from teachers or classmates, or even share experiences with them. They worry about not only making mistakes but also being criticised and further being embarrassed by teachers and peers. The anxiety of feeling embarrassed demonstrate their concerns about losing face, making fools of themselves, or being mocked by others [13]. After interviews with students, one student, Ming-yeh, said that, *I don't like to speak up in class; I am afraid of losing face in public. When I am going to say something in class, teachers would stop me and correct my mistakes all the time. Then my classmates would burst out laughing.* Another student, Ming-hua said that, *In order not to lose face in public, it's better to sit quietly and not make any trouble.* Further, Hsiao-lin said that, *I don't feel safe or secure enough to speak out in class. Teachers are always stopping my words and criticising my opinions.* The pressure and anxiety of being ridiculed and embarrassed, little by little, raises anxiety and fear of failure in these students in the language and subject knowledge-acquiring process. In turn, it results in a passive learning attitude.

### Inferiority Complex

The other reason for causing the fear of failure among Taiwanese technical and vocational students is their inferiority complex. Most of the students enrolled in technical and vocational colleges/universities are those with lower academic achievements, including English performance [2]. Those with higher academic performance would choose general universities in which to continue their education. Hence, technical and vocational students have been labelled *not intelligent*. Having been regarded as not intelligent has fostered these students' inferiority complex. After interviews

with some students, Su-chin, an interviewee, said that, *I know that I am not good. If I was good, why would I stay here? I would go to a general university.* Another student Ming-yeh said that, *...even though I have kept trying very hard, I don't think I can be as good as students in general universities.* Ya-wen said that, *I don't know why teachers have to keep reminding us that we are failures. We know we are.* Lifan said that, *Being a technical and vocational college student, I have always thought that I am inferior to general college students or someone else. Being labelled as a low achiever, I lose my motivation to learn.*

Being bound by the traditional Taiwanese education system, technical and vocational students experience language anxiety, anxiety of feeling embarrassed and inferiority complex. Gradually, losing their self-confidence and self-esteem, they raise their anxiety and fear of failure in knowledge acquiring process.

## THE TAIWANESE INTERPERSONAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

In order to understand these students' fear of failure phenomenon, it is necessary to take a look at Taiwanese culture. In Chinese hierarchy culture, paternalism is emphasised instead of personalism [14]. Unlike personalism, which involves an emphasis on interpersonal trust and personal free will, paternalism features dependence of subordinates (students) on superiors (teachers), personalised loyalty, and benevolent authoritarianism [15]. In addition, traditionally, Taiwanese academic culture places great value on teachers' authority. It is perceived that teachers should play an active role, while students should be passive. Further, Taiwanese academic culture also overemphasises the importance of teachers. Teachers know everything and students know nothing: teachers can teach, while students can only be taught. Teachers can think, while students can only be thought about. Teachers can speak, while students can only listen. Teachers discipline, while students can only be disciplined. Teachers can choose and enforce their ideas, while students can only comply. Teachers can act, while students can only act through the action of teachers. Teachers can choose the program content, while students can only adapt to the content. Accordingly, in a Taiwanese classroom, teachers serve as the subjects of the learning process in which students can only be the objects. Moreover, while teachers confusing the authority of knowledge with their own professional authority, teachers' authority is in opposition to the freedom of students [16]. This kind of classroom climate is what Freire called *banking* education [16]. Furthermore, Taiwanese academic culture has placed great value on academic performance. Those with good academic performance are labelled as good students, while those performing less well are labelled as bad students. Hence, under the existing criterion, technical and vocational students are categorised as bad students.

Given that technical and vocational students are labelled as inferior to general college/university students, it seems that *banking* education, in which memorising is over-emphasised, is not suitable for those students. In a class instruction underlining memorisation, the teacher, the authority, is expected to instil ideas and knowledge into students, the receptacles. In a classroom like this, teachers serve as knowledge producers while students serve as knowledge consumers. Knowledge becomes the goods being deposited by the depositor (teacher) to the depositories (students). In this kind of *banking* education, technical and vocational students are suspicious of their ability to *consume* the knowledge teachers deposit and to perform a certain task. Likewise, in Taiwan, students have been defined according to their test scores. Having been identified as lower achievers or slow learners, technical and vocational students have low confidence and self-esteem, hence losing their interest in acquiring knowledge [2-4][11]. Therefore, being stuck in the *banking* education setting, students can do nothing but accept the passive roles imposed on them to adapt themselves to teachers' teaching styles and content. Without doubt, this traditional classroom instruction would minimise these students' creative power and reflection ability. Therefore, the more powerless the students feel, the higher their anxiety and fear of failure.

While investigating technical and vocational students' backgrounds, it can be learned that these students are from diverse ethnic, economic, social and academic backgrounds. With these diverse backgrounds, it is not easy to find suitable teaching content for all the students. Moreover, teaching methods used in the Asian classroom are more authoritarian and expository [17]. For instance, in the traditional authoritarian Taiwanese classroom, the teacher is in complete control while transmitting knowledge to students who can only wait silently and listen carefully. That is consistent with the respect for the elders in Taiwanese culture. If students talked back in the class, it would be interpreted as an insult to the elders [18].

## APPRECIATIVE PEDAGOGICAL TECHNIQUES

In order to reduce technical and vocational students' fear of failure in language and subject knowledge learning process, the researcher proposed that teachers should apply some techniques to arouse their interest in the learning process, such as using the appreciative pedagogy in class, a teaching strategy focusing on identifying the best of *what is* in students. In other words, it is a creation of the mindset enabling students to use not only their minds and bodies but also their spirits to participate fully in instruction process [19-21]. The appreciative pedagogical techniques are shown in Figure 1.

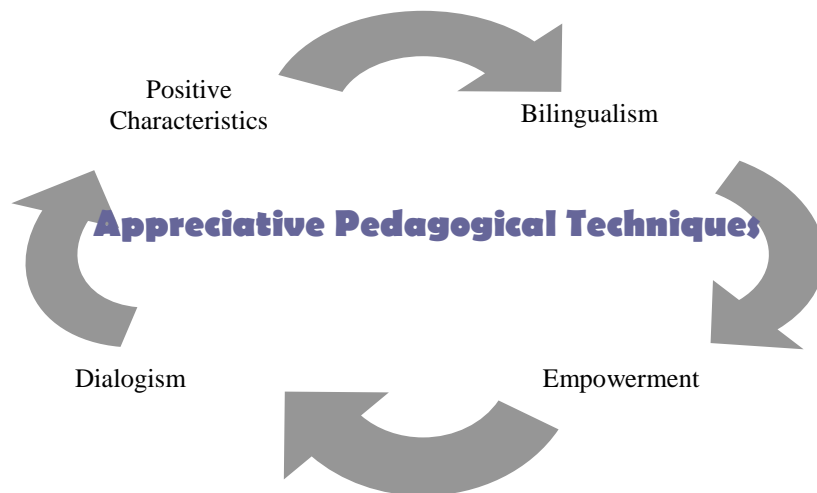


Figure 1: Appreciative pedagogical techniques.

In order to create the mindset, teachers should first focus on students' positive rather than negative characteristics. In focusing on students' positive characteristics, teachers could modify themselves to pay more attention to students' needs rather than students' problems, hence helping technical and vocational students identify their positive characteristics and competencies in order to achieve their peak performance in knowledge acquisition. Through knowing their strengths and positive characteristics well, students will willingly work in their own time and at their own pace, using self-study material or educational technological assistance to facilitate their learning process. Moreover, through recognising their own strengths, potential and positive characteristics, students, being motivated, will build up confidence in mastering their learning tasks. Only through identifying and appreciating their positive characteristics can learners deal with the language anxiety, anxiety of being embarrassed and inferiority complex. By recognising their positive characteristics, they realise what they can do, daring to face the challenges in front of them and, hence, increasing their responsibility in a variety of learning activities.

Moreover, research has shown that the most efficient way to second language literacy is through mother tongues [22][23]. In order to motivate technical and vocational students to feel confident in language and subject knowledge acquiring process. In appreciative pedagogy, bilingualism is the focus, instead of monolingualism. Collier proposed that a gradual transition to language and subject field acquisition via instruction in the native language would assure students' success [22]. The practice of appreciative pedagogy is guided by the premise that students come with a rich array of positive characteristics, such as cultural traditions, past experience, native language skills, etc. Consequently, teachers should allow technical and vocational students to incorporate their previous linguistic experience and cultural traditions into learning processes in order to enhance their confidence and comfort. Learning is a social process [24].

Language learning is also a social process; hence, it should be developed through highly contextualised social interactions with native languages and cultures to produce and give life a meaning. The use of the native language, here Mandarin Chinese, to develop students' second language proficiency is beneficial for helping students avoid both cognitive confusion and achievement lags in knowledge acquisition. Technical and vocational students are not good at their English performance [2]. However, many teachers in technical and vocational institutes are graduates from foreign countries, such as the United States, Great Britain, etc. Therefore, they would like to use the English language or textbooks while proceeding instruction in class. The use of English language books and instruction is a heavy burden on technical and vocational students. With less native language support, the students would take longer time and more energy to acquire English and master the subject knowledge, hence losing their confidence. However, when students make a positive connection with prerequisite native linguistic skills, prior knowledge, cultural background and personal experience, the experiential learning would function as an incredible source of guidance for action and experimentation in mastering language and subject field. Moreover, while learning language and subject field with the assistance of prerequisite native linguistic competency, students would have a sense of comfort and security when publicly speaking up in class, experiencing less fear and inhibition.

With the promotion of bilingualism and the assistance of Mandarin Chinese, in some way, students are empowered to engage in group discussion and class interaction, sharing the intellectual ownership of teaching-and-learning experience. On the other hand, with the assistance of empowerment, teachers can help technical and vocational students free up their thinking and speak up their diverse experiences. Moreover, when being empowered, students would feel comfortable with the process of defending their ideas because they know that their ideas and opinions will not to be

criticised and ridiculed. Hence, during the language and subject knowledge acquiring process, they would willingly invest more time, energy, and emotion in doing more tasks than others request them to do. Instead of being dictated to in learning processes, students would actively find ways to bridge the gap between class instruction and individual knowledge competency. While students are empowered, an atmosphere of dialogical communication and interaction is activated, in which both technical and vocational teachers and students can collaboratively build up knowledge through dialogical communication, not monological communication that is the communication usually used in traditional class instruction. Only through dialogical communication, discussion and negotiation between instructors and students, or between students and students, will the knowledge be expanded and renewed. Besides, with the use of dialogism, technical and vocational teachers and students can begin to appreciate multiple viewpoints, being open and willing to listen reflectively to alternative views.

The study revealed that technical and vocational students experience the fear of failure in their study partly because they are afraid of not performing well in class and partly because they worry too much about making mistakes. Hence, with language anxiety, they dare not to speak up in class. Furthermore, they also worry about being criticised and embarrassed by teachers and classmates, hence losing face and making fools of themselves [12][13]. In addition, students enrolled in technical and vocational colleges/universities are those with lower academic achievement and are consequently labelled as low achievers [2]. In turn, they raise their anxiety and fear of failure while learning language and subject field.

In order to reduce technical and vocational students' fear of failure, the researcher proposed some appreciative pedagogical techniques - focusing on positive characteristics, bilingualism, empowerment, and dialogism - to build up technical and vocational students' confidence in language and subject field acquisition. Not focusing on students' deficiencies, the practice of appreciative pedagogy empowers technical and vocational students to discover their positive characteristics and create a bilingual and dialogical learning environment to increase their confidence [19].

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Knowing that technical and vocational students lack confidence and motivation to learn, in order to help students go through their fear of failure, teachers are responsible for creating a comfortable and secure learning environment. Students' diverse personal and educational backgrounds should be taken into consideration; it is not reasonable to request that they all learn in the same way and at the same pace [2][25]. Because not all teaching methods and materials are suitable for all students in Taiwan, when those students feel uncomfortable with teaching styles or materials, they become slow learners or low achievers. In turn, they lose their motivation and interest in learning.

Technical and vocational education plays an important role in promoting life-long learning. Therefore, technical and vocational instructors, professionals and administrators should set up a series of instructional activities based on appreciative pedagogical techniques to enhance students' expertise and competency. Moreover, organisation learning should be promoted to help students appreciate their work knowledge and develop continuously students' competency. Teachers and administrators should also guide and support students' learning process and professional development [26]. In contrast with traditional instruction designed for *finding and fixing* problems, the research intended to propose the practice of appreciative pedagogical techniques to work with students' positive characteristics to lessen their fear of failure in terms of language anxiety, anxiety of feeling embarrassed and inferiority complex. Instructors should commit themselves to providing further assistance for the students' professional and career development [27]. In addition, teachers should combine teaching strategies with technical and vocational knowledge and work-based skills in a certain occupational field and provide opportunities to not only develop the students' work-based professional skills in the workforce but also increase their confidence to lessen their fear of failure phenomenon [27].

While students' diverse talents and ways of learning are appreciated, teachers can empower students to work in their own time at their own pace [28]. In addition, when teachers are willing to take more time to appreciate students' learning condition, they can provide timely and necessary assistance to students. For instance, they can realise students' learning difficulties and further derive an optimal solution to maximise the learning outcome. Instead of looking at students' deficiencies, teachers should work with students' positive characteristics and competencies, paying attention to the things that are working for them in order to develop students' potential. Besides, teachers should offer students a classroom in which they feel passionate and comfortable to learn. In traditional classes, the teachers are expected to feed certain knowledge to students. In order to facilitate learning process, teachers should empower students in their learning process. When being empowered, technical and vocational students would feel comfortable with the process of defending their ideas because they know that their ideas and opinions will not to be criticised and ridiculed. Hence, during the knowledge acquiring process, they would willingly invest more time, energy, and emotion in doing more tasks than others request them to do.

With the assistance of appreciative pedagogical techniques, technical and vocational students should always keep reminding themselves that everyone experiences failure. In addition, students should abolish the notion and statement

related to fear and failure, such as, *I am a failure*, or *I'm a loser*, for these fear and failure statements can only heighten the students' feelings of incompetence, hence fostering pessimistic attitudes [29].

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