



L2 Learning Anxiety: An impact on the acquisition of speaking competence

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Abstract

The study explores the second language Learning anxiety and its impacts on students' speaking competency. However, the current study investigates to provide an insight into the levels of anxiety experienced by the students through descriptive analysis. This phenomenon "anxiety" being complex and a complicated one, the topic requires further research and exploration and a variety of diverse approaches and perspectives. Anxious students may avoid studying and, in some cases, skip class to alleviate their anxiety. Clinical experiences illustrate that these problems can interfere with foreign language students in language learning. The participants are the graduate students from Minhaj University and UMT, Lahore. The results showed that the students had anxiety level on medium level and there was an invert relationship between the anxiety level and the speaking scores. The various factors that cause anxiety among the students have been identified, and it was also seen that anxiety has its most negative impacts on students' communicative and interactive ability. However, to improve certain limitations, the current study also suggests some recommendations.

Keywords: language anxiety, speaking competence, language learning, L2 class anxiety

Introduction

Anxiety is a feeling of excess worry which can be characterized by uneasiness and nervousness. Its effect on language learning cannot be denied. Anxiety really affects a person's capability to pay attention or focus. An anxious student would learn less and perform ineffectively. On the other hand anxiety can intrude social behaviors like one may get conscious of self-esteem, mistakes and being a laughing stalk. Language anxiety is considered to be an important factor in second language acquisition because it is responsible for affecting learner's cognitive functions as well as social behaviors. Language anxiety can be defined as the fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language (Gardner & MacIntyre 1993) or the worry and negative emotional reaction when learning or using a second language (MacIntyre 1999).

Many people acknowledge their inability and failure in learning to speak a second/foreign language. These learners may be good at learning other skills but, when it comes to learning to speak another language, they claim to have a 'mental block' against it (Horwitz et al., 1986: 125). Then, what is the reason behind their poor performance in foreign language class? In many cases, they may have an anxiety reaction that prevents them in achieving their desired goal in foreign language learning, especially in classroom situations.

There are enormous studies which have been conducted in order to understand the relationship between language anxiety and second language acquisition (SLA). These studies have concluded that anxiety directly affects SLA. Elaine K. Horwitz, Gardner and Lambert, McIntyre and many other scholars and researchers have been working with anxiety and its effects on foreign language classroom and its effect on language outside the classroom. Teachers used to be the focus and center of a foreign language class in the past, but with the changing trends, this focus has turned towards the second language learner. In this study we shall see, does the interactive environment of a language classroom reduces anxiety among second language learners?

The English language has become the most widely used foreign language in Pakistan. One reason for learning this language is that it is a need of this brave new world. It has become symbol of power and status. In Pakistan English as a foreign language has always been as important as other subject in curriculum. The course work is mostly in English but the problematic area for students is that they are exposed to English only in a language class, whereas, in other classes the medium of interaction remains their first language (L1). Most of the learners express their fears and a feeling of nervousness against learning English as a foreign language because use of English language as medium of interaction is far less.

Effects of Anxiety on Language Learning

From the last so many years, researchers and theorists have been working on foreign language classroom anxiety in relation to the learner's performance, achievement as well as on the sources of anxiety (Bailey, et al. 2000; Cheng, 2001; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a, 1991b; Onwuegbuzie, et al. 1999). Many of the researchers believe that foreign language anxiety (FLA) affects students' performance and their achievement in language learning, because they experience apprehension, worry, even dread. Anxiety has been proven to negatively affect achievement in the second language learning (Aida, 1994; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b).

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) students who are too anxious about their performance may become so nervous when they make errors; they try to improve it by studying even more, and then if they do not succeed in improving their grades. This causes frustration and leads to reverse behavior. Anxious students may avoid studying and in some cases skip class to alleviate their anxiety. Clinical experiences illustrate that these problems can interfere with foreign language students in language learning.

It has noticed that number of students believe that nothing should be said in the foreign language until it is said correctly. Such beliefs produce anxiety, because students are expected to communicate in the second language only when fluency is attained. At times excellent language students, who can speak in second language with fluently, may make mistakes or forget words and need to guess more than occasionally.

Statement of the problem

English language has been used very frequently in Pakistan. Most of the books which are included in undergraduate courses are in English language. Teachers use English language to communicate in the class. It's not limited to just the classroom. It has become the need of the time. Second language learners can be the students of engineering or business studies, they can be science students or arts students, and English language would be the medium of

communication in their field. For that reason it's important for the students to be proficient in this language. In this study the researcher wants to investigate the learner's opinion about the role of interactive classroom environment in reducing foreign language classroom anxiety among the undergraduate students of Minhaj University and UMT (University of Management and Technology).

Significance of the study

- This study is significant because previous studies in this field have proved that there's a negative correlation between anxiety, motivation and learner's performance.
- It's very important for students to get a hold on their fears and for teachers to be aware of their problems and fears so that the classroom environment becomes as non-threatening as possible. From this study the teachers of undergraduate courses will get useful information about student's perspective of a comfortable and effective learning environment.
- Hence it may help the teachers to adopt such a strategy which may reduce student's stress.

Research Question:

- How does L2 learning anxiety influence on the acquisition of speaking competence?

Literature Review

It has been argued by scholars and researchers since 1960's that anxiety is one of the major factor that disrupts the acquisition of second language learning. However, initially not much practical work had been done; the documentation of these theories came much later. Almost three decades ago, Scovel (1978) tried to investigate a synonymous issue regarding anxiety and second language acquisition. Scovel (1978) discovered there is not much material or literature review available on this particular subject. In fact some of the studies suggested a positive relationship between anxiety and second language learning to which he held contrary views. While going through all the previous researches and data Scovel analyzed that literature on this subject matter was not only insufficient but also held conflicting notions, showing a positive or altogether no relationship between anxiety and second language learning (Chastain, 1975; Kleinmann, 1977). Consequently, the data analyzed was reflecting the opposite notion that students who showed high level of anxiety were most likely to achieve higher scores in the acquisition of second language. Scovel suggested a coherent solution to this problem. He reasoned that as the various studies proposed different notions regarding anxiety therefore different anxiety measures should be considered while analyzing any data for instance, facilitating-debilitating anxiety, test-anxiety etc. Scovel determined that language analysis and researchers should be more precise about their finding regarding anxiety in particular and specify the numerous types of anxiety that occur during the acquisition of the second language (1978).

It is important to mention the theories pertaining to anxiety and its effects on students in the acquisition of second language. Initially, a very general theory of anxiety is discussed which is given by Bandura (1991) and Pekrun (1992). Then moving forward more specific theories related to language anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994) and anxiety level that occurs on an individual level due to contextual differences (Pappamihiel, 1999), are also discussed. Moreover also keeping in view with MacIntyre and Gardner's that "while the instruments used to measure language anxiety should be specific to the language area, theoretical links to the more general anxiety literature can be strengthened", the psychological impacts have also been put forth for a better understanding of this phenomena.

According to Pekrun's (1992) Expectancy-Value Theory of Anxiety and Bandura's (1991) theory of self-efficacy, some of the general concepts regarding anxiety can be understood. Both of these theories uses different types of assessments to evaluate and propose numerous reasons behind the anxiety is encountered by an individual. The concept behind these theories is that distraction and worry is fore mostly related to appraisals of situation as intimidating or net and then the determination of the learners' efficiency in his/her ability to deal the particular situation. Pekrun's (1992) Expectancy Value-Theory of Anxiety (EVTA) model is a combination of two factors; the expectancy of the situation-outcome (appraisals of a position as being intimidating or not) and expectancy of the control experience (assessments about one's aptitude to inductee and carry out an operative solution). Anticipating negative, possibly destructive proceedings in which human beings when do not perceive themselves as productive mediators, often create anxiety. In the same way, Bandura's (1991) model of self-efficacy suggests that it's upon an individual perception about a threatening situation whether he/she is able to tackle it positively or let the anxiety take over. Bandura furthermore reasons that self-esteem can also work as a modifying factor in circumstances in which anxiety is likely to be aroused. Whenever the learners/students perceive the situation to be as threatening, more negative effects are to be associated on the acquisition of a second language. As extremely anxious personalities are frequently in a state of shared attentional means (Eysenck 1979), their aptitude to focus and be efficacious at learning procedure is hindered. In other words, when students are constantly preoccupied with the threat a learning situation poses, they cannot fully concentrate on that task.

According to Schallert (1991) at an initial stage of acquiring the second language, a learner/student is using multiple resources to gain attention which they have not yet acquired to understand a foreign language habitually or spontaneously. The students who are more likely to be anxious towards their given tasks are unable to automatize actions successfully as their resources attached to attention given process are diverted due to their anxiety. Moreover, students' self-appraisal can also hamper the learning process if he/she engages in self-deprecating self-, self-degrading and self-focused thoughts for instance, "I am not capable of doing this task or I am stupid". Gibbons et al (1991) states that such negative notions affects the ability of a learner's acquisition process. Anxiety is multifaceted concept, is not only dependent upon a learner's own potential about the given task but also depends on factors such as appraisals that concern the inherent and such threats that are most likely to occur during the acquisition process. These numerous appraisals/assessments combined with the effect of task-irrelevant ongoing process can adversely affect the acquisition, in such ways that the learner is usually not aware of (Tobias, 1986).

Trait anxiety is a very individualistic factor that pertains to how an individual is susceptible to anxiety in various situations (Dornyei 2005). According to Dornyei it can be due to the kind of nature that person possesses. MacIntyre (1999) further adds that anxiety can be “situation specific.” As well. Which is also analogous to trait anxiety in a way that demands a particular situation or occurrence for being anxious. For example, English language learners (ELLs) can experience a certain level of anxiety if they are spontaneously called upon to communicate or speak in English in front of the classroom. State anxiety, according to MacIntyre (1999) is an emotional reaction to a current situation and is more likely to be “moment-to-moment” (Dornyei 2005).

Horwitz and Cope (1986) state that second language acquisition is a complex factor as even people who are fluent and competent in their native language can feel hesitant when asked to speak in second language. Moreover, learners of a second language can feel threatened about their self-image in a setting of a second language classroom. Applebaum and Trotter, (1986) concludes that it is the fear of being assessed negatively rather than the communicative process itself.

Guiora (1983) argues that in terms of identity and self-evaluation, second language acquisition can be highly traumatic for some learners as it affects their own sense of self view of the world. According to Beebe (1983) the perceived risk can be more greater than the benefits of acquiring a second language as the traumatizing effect on the student might hamper or halt his/her learning aptitude forever. Moreover, Schumann (1997), scrutinizing the psychological factors of anxiety while language acquisition, he proposes his pidginization theory in which he suggests that there is a significant relationship between the learners’ willingness to acquire a language and his/her association and relation with the target language group. That is to say that if the learner maintains a distance with the target group language then he/she is less likely to acquire high levels of desired language skills.

Henceforth, anxiety can be generally regarded to be linked with fears of self-efficacy and evaluations/appraisals of such situations considered to be threatening. According to Bandura (1991) in certain language acquisition situations aspects like apprehension in communication, threat of negative assessment, test anxiety and fear to one’s own perception of self can act as a stimulation to perceive second language acquisition as a threatening situation. Moreover, in a research by Bandura (1991) about the language acquisition among Mexicans living in U.S, he analyzed that there were more instances of state anxiety rather than trait anxiety due to the social and cultural differences. According to Bandura, “Situational Anxieties in ELL Students Assuming an individual with state anxiety rather than trait anxiety, concepts of self-efficacy are tied to past successes, vicarious experiences, and social persuasion” (1991).

The previous researches prove that the apprehension among students/learners is due to their own frame of mind in which they regard themselves as incompetent of L2. The significance of self can be determined through Dörnyei’s (2005, 2009) L2 motivational self-system. According to the Dörnyei’s, there are two aspects of self, first is the self that he/she creates in the mind and the other solely depends on the pragmatic qualities of self. He termed them as, the “ideal self” and the “ought-to self”. The ideal self is “the L2-specific aspect of one’s ideal self” (106). It signifies a preferred future self for instance an excellent writer or a well-spoken in L2. The “ought-to self”, refers to the notions that one create in one’s mind to accomplish self-perceived tasks, obligations or duties. Prior researches made on this concept proves that the “ought-to self” is the reason behind triggering emotions of anxiety in the acquisition of the language (Papi

2010). Keeping in view the dual effects of self-concept on second language or foreign language anxiety it can be said that this concept has a bidirectional impact on the language anxiety.

Research Design

Anxiety is one the most significant variable that is perceived to be synonymous with the acquisition of second/foreign language. In order to inspect the affiliation between foreign language anxiety, English learning motivation through an interactive classroom, and afterwards the evaluation of performance in English language, the present research study investigated an undergraduate class of a prestigious university of Punjab. The module chosen for the research study was English novel. A total number of 29 students (girls and boys) were the part of this experimental study. The focus of this study was to scrutinize the effects of an effective interaction between students and the teacher in an ESL classroom environment. Therefore, to completely apprehend the nature of this research study, the investigation was divided into three parts; a pre-test and a post-test evaluation, a thorough questionnaire regarding the level of anxiety the students feel in an ESL classroom along with an interview of the focus group towards the end of the research study.

The first part of the research study was to investigate the language anxiety through a questionnaire. The participants of the focus group were asked to fill the survey in the initial stage of the research. The questionnaire was designed and adapted directly from Liu and Jackson's studies which was adapted from the scale developed by Horwitz et al. As theorized by Horwitz et al. (2001), the FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale) intended to measure three dimensions of foreign language classroom anxiety: fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension and test anxiety. The background questionnaire aimed to gather the respondents' age, name and their grade. All the items except the background questionnaire items were placed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

The survey based on anxiety in learning foreign language was taken from the two universities, Minhaj University, Lahore and UMT Lahore. A total number of 10 questions were asked in the questionnaire. The participants had to choose their answer from the given Likert scale.

Data Analysis

The first question from the questionnaire was, "I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class." 34% of the participants chose "strongly agree", 62% "agree", 17% "neither agree nor disagree", and 10% "disagree" whereas 6.8% "strongly disagree". The nature of this particular question was to gauge the confidence level of the participant and to evaluate that how many students feel comfortable in speaking foreign language in class. The results indicate that mostly students do not feel comfortable and confident while talking in foreign/English language. The confidence level can be given a boost if along with L2, L1 is also incorporated.

The second question was based on the fact that students fear making mistakes, "I don't worry about making mistakes in language class." 6.8% "strongly agree", 27.5% "agree", 6.8 "neither agree nor disagree" and 51% "disagree" whereas 6.8% "strongly disagree". The result indicates

that majority of the participants did not agree to the statement i.e, they do worry making mistakes in language class. There can be multiple reasons behind this factor. One of them is the fear of being negatively evaluated.

Third question was also synonymous to the second question; fear in foreign language classroom. “I tremble when I’m going to be called on in language class.” 10% of the participants “strongly agreed”, 51% “agree”, 27.5% “neither agree nor disagree”, and 3.4% “disagree” whereas 6.8% “strongly disagree”. The result of this particular question again correlated to the fact that majority of the students feel under confident and hesitant in participating during a language learning class

The fourth question was “It frightens me when I don’t understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.” 0% “strongly disagree”, 62% agree, 17% “neither agree nor disagree”, 10% “disagree” and 10% “strongly disagree”. The outcome of this particular answer also portrays that students are frightened of the fact that they are unable to comprehend the lecture given by their instructor. This fear also hinders language acquisition.

The fifth question adheres to the fact of interest on the part of student in taking part in another ESL class, “It wouldn’t bother me at all to take more foreign language classes” 0% “strongly agree”, 48% “agree” 37.9% “neither agree nor disagree”, 10% “disagree”, and 3.4% “strongly disagree”. The result shows that students are interested in the acquisition of second language.

Another very important aspect of second language acquisition is covered in the following question, “ I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am”. This question adheres to the self-esteem of the learner. In a classroom environment there are students belonging to diverse intellectual capabilities. A learner’s ability might hinder if he/she starts comparing him/herself with other students who might perform better.

The next question was based on participants’ level of anxiety during their test, “I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.” 0% “strongly agree”, 68.9% agree, 24% neither agree nor disagree, 6.8% disagree, 0% strongly disagree. The outcome of the survey however, indicates that the majority of students do not have much trouble in attempting a written language test. This also indicates that the area of problem in second language acquisition is mainly concerned with spoken language. Learners who even write effectively in English might have a problem in spoken language due to several issues such as low self-esteem, fear of negative evaluation or being mocked by their classmates etc.

Question number eight again correlated to the fear of speaking during the class, “I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation”. 6.8% of the participants “strongly agree”, 79% “agree”, , 3.4% “neither agree nor disagree”, 6.8% “disagree”, 3.4% “strongly disagree”. The result of this question clearly indicates a strong apprehension in class participation specifically if called upon by the teacher when the learner feels unprepared on the subject.

The next question inquires about the overall perception of an ESL classroom, “I don’t understand why some people get to upset over foreign language classes.” 0% “strongly agree”, 37.9% “agree, 62% “neither agree nor disagree” 0% “disagree” and 0% “strongly disagree” as well. So the majority of the students opted for a neutral stance.

Another very significant question that shows the negative impact of anxiety on not only language acquisition but also affects the prior knowledge of the learner, “In language class I can get so nervous I forget things I know.” 3.4% “strongly agree” 58.6% “agree” 10% “neither agree nor disagree”. 24% “disagree” and 3.4% “strongly disagree”. The outcome vividly depicts that students/learners tend to get nervous in an ESL classroom due to which they also fail to recall what they already know. The next question, “it embarrasses me to volunteer answers in language class”. 0% “strongly agree”, 41% “agree”, 27.5% “neither agree not disagree” 24% “disagree” and 6.8% “strongly disagree”.

The result of the next question, “I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers” was enlightening. 0% “strongly agree”, 37.9% “agree” 55% “neither agree nor disagree” 6.8% “disagree” and 0% “strongly disagree”. The result throws light on the fact that students do not feel so hesitant or shy towards speaking English with the native speaker. Another question, “I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language” got the following result, 0% “strongly agree”, 24% “agree” 68.9% “neither agree nor disagree”, 6.8% “disagree” and 0% “strongly disagree”. The results supports the fact that it is the rigid and evaluative classroom environment that threatens the language acquisition and also arouses anxiety.

The question, “I get upset when I don’t understand what the teacher is correcting” refers to the anxiety level aroused when the student/learner is unable to comprehend the lesson delivered by the instructor. 3.4% “strongly agree”, 75.8% “agree”, 10% “neither agree nor disagree”, 10% “disagree” and 0% “strongly disagree”. Huelsman (in Phillips, 1991) recommends that "something as simple as an encouraging smile before the test begins might diminish the ominous atmosphere."(p 89)

The next question also adheres to the anxiety level in the language class, “Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.” 3.4% “strongly agree”, 65.5% “agree”, 6.8% “neither agree nor disagree”, 24% “disagree” and 0% “strongly disagree”. The outcome corroborates the fact that anxiety hinders language acquisition. “I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class”, the result of this question indicated that majority of the student lacked the confidence in participating during the class. 0% “strongly agree”, 41% “agree”, 13.7% “neither agree nor disagree”, 34% “disagree” and 10% “strongly disagree”.

Question number sixteen throws light on the role of teacher in ESL acquisition, “I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.” 41% “strongly agree”, 44.8% “agree”, 6.8% “neither agree nor disagree”, 6.8% “disagree” and 0% “strongly disagree”. Another question, “I don’t feel pressure to prepare very well for language class” had the outcome of 0% “strongly agree”, 55% “agree”, 10% “neither agree not disagree”, 24% “disagree” and 10% “strongly disagree”. Lack of motivation can also a major factor behind the fact that students do not feel the need to prepare well for their language class.

The next question addresses the students concern about speaking among their class fellows, “I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students” 6.8% “strongly agree”, 79% “agree”, 3.4% “neither agree nor disagree”, 10% “disagree” and 0% “strongly disagree”. Moreover, the question, “I get confuse and nervous when I am speaking in

my language class also sheds light on the same fact that learners' learning skills are affected due to his/her apprehension towards speaking in public. 3.4% "strongly agree", 79% "agree", 0% "neither agree nor disagree", 13.7% "disagree" and 3.4% "strongly disagree".

The question, "I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn speak a foreign language" measured the level of difficulty that the students associate with the language (English). 51.7% of the students "strongly agree", 31% "agree", 3.4% "neither agree nor disagree", 13.7% "disagree" and 0% "strongly disagree". The outcome indicates that the rules associated with English grammar also hinders language acquisition. Anxiety is not the only factor behind the hindrance of second language acquisition. "I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language", the outcome of this question was 17% "strongly agree" 51% "agree" 17% "neither agree nor disagree" 6.8% "disagree" and 6.8% "strongly disagree". Thus, the result shows that the learners also fear being ridiculed by their class mates.

Conclusion

Learners who undergo a moderate anxiety level while learning foreign language may simply delay the work, avoid participating in the class or prefer sitting in the last row. While some students merely ever feel anxiety in a language class. The effects of anxiety are not only limited to the classroom environment. Scholars and researchers have just begun to comprehend the role that anxiety plays in the hindrance of foreign language acquisition. Foreign language anxiety can be pervasive to the extent that its exact repercussion cannot be understood without a rigorous research in this area of study. Individual reactions to foreign language acquisition do vary widely. Learners/students who face severe anxiety in foreign language acquisition either change the subject or avoid attending the foreign language class due to the fear of being negatively evaluated or so and so forth.

Recently there has been a trend or a revival of interest in foreign language study. Due to globalization and technological advancements, academic institutes have shifted their interest in the learning and acquisition of foreign language. The result of this research study indicates the overhauling existence of foreign language anxiety among most of the learners in an ESL classroom. It is quite shocking to observe that even in this age and era and all the modern ways of teaching, anxiety among students have not been controlled yet. The tenacity of the problem, despite of being researched and looked into by various researchers still need more details and rigorous research in terms of the cases behind anxiety, the nature of anxiety and its treatment/cure as well. Moreover, the research was able to highlight the following problem areas regarding anxiety in an ESL classroom environment.

Though, the research aimed at to provide an insight into the levels of anxiety experienced by the students through descriptive and statistical aspects. However, this phenomenon "anxiety" being complex and a complicated one, the topic requires further research and exploration and a variety of diverse approaches and perspectives. The factor that evokes language anxiety is "fear of evaluation": evaluation by peers, evaluation by instructors, even self-evaluation can hinder the language acquisition because of high expectations and beliefs and ESL learning. The anxiety occurring in L2 acquisition can be somewhat alleviated by the positive and supportive role played by the language instructor. Teachers who acknowledge students' fear and feelings of

isolation can offer suggestions for acquiring confidence in learning and speaking foreign language. The focus of this study is not just to highlight the problem but to aid the study with a pragmatic solution that positively affects the language learning process. The study also indicates the role of teacher as being integral and of utmost significance in terms of foreign language acquisition.

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