

A Study of Language Anxiety among English Language Learners in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract:

Classroom anxiety is a recurrent phenomenon for language learners. There are various factors that cause language anxiety, the most common of which include learners' excessive self-consciousness and self-awareness concerning their oral reproduction and performance and their peculiar, and quite often misplaced and mistaken, views and beliefs regarding different approaches. Other potential reasons for this problem could include the fear, and the consequent deterrence occasioned thereof, of encountering difficulties in language learning, specifically learners' individual problems regarding the culture of the target language and the varying social statuses of speakers. The most important fear is, perhaps, the deterrent fear of causing damage to one's self-identity. Therefore, while needing to paying special attention to language learners' anxiety reactions, language teachers have a crucial role in helping their students achieve the expected performance goals in the target language. Another factor that could potentially lead to language anxiety is simply the poor command of the target language. This problem could be attributed to linguistic barriers and obstacles language learners encounter in learning and using the target language. In the current study, using a qualitative, semi-structured interview and the focus-group discussion technique, the researcher aims to investigate the factors that contribute to language anxiety among Arab language learners. It focuses on learners both within the classroom setting and without, i.e. in the social context, and recommends a number of approaches to manage and overcome this problem.

Keywords: language anxiety, language learners, classroom anxiety, anxiety reaction, situation-specific anxiety

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Introduction

The worldwide popularity and the increasing, even exponential, rise of English as an international language has made the demand to learn it (with good communication skills) all the more essential and inescapable. However, learners of the English language frequently face and report emotions such as fear, stress, nervousness, and anxiety in their journey towards attaining their desired competence and communicative skills in the language. In some extreme instances, it leads to learners' complete inability, occasioned by fear, even to attempt to speak English at all (what is oftentimes termed a "mental block" against learning a language).

In their *Introduction to Psychology*, Hilgard, Atkinson, & Atkinson (1979), discuss anxiety as a psychosomatic concept, commonly considered by psychologists as "a state of uneasiness and fear, a vague anxiety that is specifically associated with the particular object or phenomenon". Language anxiety is, in another interpretation offered by Horwitz (2001), a spontaneously shown reaction by the majority of language learners that negatively impacts the language learning process and has come to represent one of the most studied variables in all of psychological themes of education.

Language anxiety can inhibit all kinds of learning processes, but, when it is specifically associated with learning a second or foreign language, it is called "second/foreign language anxiety". According to Tanveer (2007), studying learners' reactions operating under anxiety is of paramount importance, since it enables the teacher to help them, in turn, to achieve the required performance goals in the target language. Discussing, and trying to answer, two fundamental questions should precede any discussion of language anxiety. First, what 'is' language anxiety? And, why is it considered so important in learning and speaking a new language? Second, how, and if, is foreign language anxiety different from the language anxiety experienced in the process of learning the first language? There are two approaches that account for the onset of language anxiety. In the first one, language anxiety is a comprehensive concept of anxiety and a rudimentary human reaction possibly induced by numerous amalgamations of situational factors (McIntyre, 1995; McIntyre & Gardner, 1989, as cited in Tittle, 1997). According to Horwitz et al. (1986), a feeling of awkwardness experienced by a 'shy' student when delivering a short speech in front of an entire class can be regarded as language anxiety; it is an intrinsic mode of anxiety triggered by the combination of language anxiety and other anxieties that results in an odd type of internal hindrance in language learning. In the other viewpoint, it is argued that there is an element inherent to the language learning experience that turns certain individuals anxious and fearful of language learning. When this nervousness or fear occurs in a language-learning context, it is termed language anxiety. Psychologists tend to use the term "anxiety reaction" to separate people who are usually fearful in general circumstances from those who become nervous only in language-specific situations (Horwitz et al., 1986).

The obstacle that language anxiety poses is an additional trial to both language learners and their teachers/educators. The increasing modern-day pressure to communicate 'only in English' in language classes leads to anxiety in some student, since, for them, it exposes their weaknesses in front of their fellow learners. Therefore, in order to support learners to develop their communication skills in the target language effectively, it is essential to take learner anxiety into particular consideration in modern language classroom settings.

Definitions and Types of Anxiety

In psychology, anxiety is a psychosomatic concept generally defined as a condition of anxiety and fear and a vague apprehension usually linked to an object and or phenomenon (Hilgard, Atkinson, & Atkinson, 1971; cited in Scovel, 1991). Many language learners experience anxiety as a spontaneous and inevitable reaction. This reaction has a negative effect on language learning and has, thus, come to constitute one of the most vastly scrutinized variables among the psychological themes of education (Horwitz, 2001). Psychologists distinguish three different types of anxiety, i.e. trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. For Scovel (1991), trait anxiety is a relatively unwavering and enduring personality-specific quality and a tendency to be anxious most of the time. State anxiety, on the other hand, refers to a fleeting state and/or a reaction to a specific anxiety-provoking stimulus such as an important test (Spielberger, 1983; cited in Horwitz, 2001). Situation-specific anxiety refers to the insistent and multi-dimensional nature of some anxieties (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a; cited in Horwitz, 2001) that can be provoked by an explicit type of state or stimulus such as speaking before an audience in public (stage fright), certain interactive exams, and classroom participation (Ellis, 1994).

Foreign language anxiety

Anxiety experienced while learning a second or foreign language is called “second/foreign language anxiety”. According to Horwitz & Young (1991), it is a composite and multi-faceted phenomenon. McIntyre & Gardner (1994) believe it to be “a particular state of tension, anxiety, uneasiness, and fear linked with the provocation of the involuntary nervous system”. In their study, Horwitz et al. (1986) observed that anxiety is mostly associated with the two basic and interactive skills of learning a foreign language, i.e. listening and speaking. This might be due to the fact that, in any linguistic communicative interaction, it is impossible to separate these skills from one another.

Cause(s) of language anxiety

For Schwartz (1972; cited in Scovel, 1991), language anxiety is associated with learners’ self-consciousness and a fundamental internal stimulus such as individual self-perceptions about other people (peers, teachers, etc.). It could be observed in various situations that require communicating in the target language and expressing one’s individual opinions using the foreign/second language. Among other reasons, language anxiety could be possibly caused by an incompetence to use the target language and, also, a lack of knowledge (Sparks & Ganschow, 1991; cited in Horwitz, 2001). Overall, it may be due to the linguistic difficulties language learners face while learning and using the target language.

Within a social context, language anxiety may be caused by external stimuli (Schwartz, 1972; cited in Scovel, 1991) and could include diverse social and cultural settings, predominantly situations where second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) learning takes place. The target language is, in other words, an alternative communicative tool, and, consequently, as in any human interaction, there is a tendency in some individuals to experience anxiety (Gardner 1990; cited in Horwitz & Young , 1991). The assumed public identity of the L2/FL speakers, the power relations and hierarchies between/among them, and many other issues and factors (such as gender discrimination) could play a big role in causing language anxiety. Investigating the factors that

cause anxiety helps language teachers to lessen fear and nervousness in the classroom setting and create a learning environment that contributes to learners' ability to acquire the target language.

Method

In order to fulfill the objective of this study, a qualitative semi-structured interview and the focus-group discussion technique were used. The present study aims to investigate the factors conducive to language anxiety in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students of the English Language Institute (ELI) of King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah in both classroom settings and in the social context. The participants included sixty EFL (the foundation year program) students of level 102 at the ELI. The participants were selected randomly from five different 102 classes.

Findings

Studies conducted on foreign language anxiety have invariably confirmed its negative effect on the process of learning and particularly speaking the second/foreign language and, in order to become a successful foreign language speaker, students need to overcome this problem (Horwitz et al., 1986). It has been observed that language anxiety is closely associated with how learners perceive the language learning process, their self-consciousness about the language and how they should be acting in any communicative setting, and also the linguistic complications they have to deal with in their interactions in English.

Anxiety-inducing factors

In this study, we observed extreme language anxiety among the majority of Saudi Arabian participants, which, compared with participants in other similar research projects in the related field, it appears to be considerably higher. Jones (2004) believes that there are social aspects related to the anxiety reactions of language learners. In our study, the pressure to achieve native-like mastery proved a further major cause of anxiety for language learners. Strict and tense classroom settings was found to be another important cause of their language anxiety. As Tsui (1996) states, teachers need to take into consideration that a language classroom itself could become an extremely anxiety-inducing environment for students. It is possible that, at least, for some language learners, the formal setting of a language classroom, where strictly correct and accurate use of the target language is the rule, is a key source of anxiety and fear. The findings of this study indicate that the participants believed a friendly attitude and a relaxed classroom setting helped lessen anxiety. On the other hand, learners tend to feel more nervous and anxious in classroom settings where older, more traditional learning arrangements and methods, such as the audio-lingual language teaching method according to which learners are required to reiterate 'tedious' drills and activities, are followed. Language learners feel less nervous and anxious in classroom settings that focus on student-centered and interactive activities. Giving presentations and lectures before an audience of students and the teacher has also been found to be an extremely anxiety-inducing situation. These demotivating teacher-centered methods have been reported to make the classroom environment extremely formal and taxing for learners.

As Koch and Terrell (1991), Young (1990), and Price (1991) report, the majority of participants find oral presentation the most anxiety-inducing activity in language classrooms. There is a common perception among language teachers that oral presentations help learners to feel less anxious, while, in reality, it does the exact reverse by making them, among other things,

go through the stressful situation of having to remember what they have memorized (Tanveer, 2007).

In Jones' research (2004), the fear of making errors and the subsequent uneasiness before the classmates constituted the main cause of language anxiety for most of the learners. Language learners feel anxiety for the fear of appearing incompetent in front of their peers. This fear, which can sometimes amount to a paralyzing terror, of committing errors poses a big obstacle before speaking and using a foreign language in classroom settings. In Gregersen and Horwitz's (2002) study of the correlation between language learning and perfectionism, a strong link was found between students' fear of making errors and their concern to maintain a positive image before an audience of their teachers and peers/fellow learners.

The socio-cultural context

The social context, including beliefs, social values and status, and a feeling of being alienated can also impact language anxiety. In this study, social factors proved as important as linguistic factors in triggering language anxiety.

Experiencing the new language

Having limited access and exposure to adequate speaking resources and opportunities, as is the case in Saudi Arabia, makes learners undergo difficulties in the development of their communicative capability, which, in turn, hinders interaction.

Cultural differences

'Cultural differences' is another, often underestimated, cause of classroom anxiety. Tanveer (2007) believes that a failure to adapt to, and a feeling of estrangement with, the culture of the target language leads to increased anxiety. Most participants tend to do all they can to evade public interaction so as to avoid losing face, which goes on to corroborate Jones' thesis that 'language anxiety is an apprehension of saving face in different cultures' (2004). Language anxiety can, however, be a culture-bound and culture-specific phenomenon, the reception and perception of which can vary from culture to culture.

Social Status and self-image

Participants' social statuses can have a remarkable impact on their interactions (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977, as cited in Carrier, 1999). Also, the findings of the current study reveal that speakers' feeling of unease and inferiority while talking to someone they assume to be higher in status may result in stress or anxiety. According to Pica (1987), a, real or assumed, status gap between learners and teachers could be one further cause of anxiety for learners. It goes on to show that a lack of confidence in one's linguistic competence leads to low self-confidence and anxiety on the side of learners in their interactions with speakers who have a good command of the language, e.g. native speakers (Peirce, 1995). The fear to interact in cultural settings, which is partly due to speakers' inadequate linguistic capabilities, could result in poor communication. For such learners, speaking a foreign language is a problem because of the apprehension of losing their positive image or self-identity. Many researchers confirm social anxiety as a feeling of losing individual self-confidence which is intensely ingrained in the first language (Guiora, 1972; Peirce, 1995, 1984; Rardin, 1988; Leary, 1982; cited in Ohata, 2005).

Managing with stress and anxiety in language classes

Language anxiety has an important, though detrimental, role in the learning process of communicating in a foreign language. Researchers, in their studies on language anxiety, have proposed different approaches to deal with this multi-faceted problem. A popular solution is to have more casual and less formal classroom settings with a friendlier atmosphere. According to the constructivist theory of language learning, such classroom settings provide language learners with an environment where students can afford to make mistakes without looking inept. They also help educators create an environment in which learners feel positive, accomplished, and comfortable while using the language and avoid setting up activities that could make students feel neglected. Others propose a truly unrestrained interactive classroom setting where learners are given a chance to participate in spite of their insufficient language competence. Interactive techniques such as drama and role-play activities could help students feel safe in an invented setting with a pretended identity.

Tanveer (2007) puts forward the idea that, in order to reduce anxiety, instructions should be thorough and clear and it should also be guaranteed that the learners have adequate ideas and preparation to accomplish the tasks. Teachers have a critical role in making the classroom a more comfortable, welcoming, and cheerful learning zone and a less anxiety-inducing place. Tanveer goes on to suggest that instructors should establish an environment where making mistakes while learning a language is not only acceptable but welcome. In fact, teachers should regard mistakes as learning opportunities and welcome, and introduce, them as a norm in classroom settings. According to this approach, teachers are encouraged to offer counteractive and constructive feedback on errors rather than disturb and correct students repeatedly with outdated and unconstructive methods such as on-the-spot error correction, etc. Instead, teachers, for instance, can take cloistered notes of the errors made by learners and then address them collectively in front of the entire class without mentioning the name of a specific learner. Also, in order to effectively deal with language anxiety, individual learners' self-perceptions and beliefs should be taken into consideration.

In the same vein, teachers are invited to point out to the learners that feeling uncomfortable and anxious while speaking a foreign language is common and acceptable so as to establish a friendlier environment that welcomes student participation. Tanveer (2007) believes this strategy would unburden students and help them come to the realization that the state of anxiety is common among most of the learners and is not associated with any particular individual. According to Price (1991), this method helps teachers to alleviate, if not completely eliminate, an antagonistic, tense, and judgmental classroom setting and make students feel better and more self-confident. This way, students feel more optimistic, and at the same time less concerned, with their individual personas and consequently sum up their own strong points and build upon them. Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999) believe, by adopting such strategies, instructors can help students build confidence and self-respect in their second/foreign language acquisition through reassurance, encouragement, optimistic support, and understanding.

Language teachers are also encouraged to warn against perfectionism and other ingrained traditional beliefs and habits and instill the idea, in the students, that learning a language requires working tolerantly and making a lot of mistakes on the way. They should also avoid setting the

native speaker's English (pronunciation, vocabulary, etc.) as a benchmark. Announcing feedback collectively, in the form of grades and marks, is another practice that instructors should refrain from conducting for its adverse effects.

The vital role of the language teachers

Language instructors have a great role in moderating, or intensifying, the anxiety experienced by students in classroom settings (Brandl, 1987; Horwitz et al., 1986; Price, 1991; Young, 1990, 1991; cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). Teachers' views concerning the process of language learning and teaching, their response to learners' spoken mistakes, and the way they create a taxing environment in the classroom have been reported to impact second/foreign language anxiety (Tanveer, 2007). Many learners have also reported teachers' patronizing and insensitive attitude and treatment of learners, particularly when committing errors and mistakes, as a factor that adversely affects their willingness to participate in classroom activities. According to Jones (2004), inappropriate treatment of learner errors, and the subsequent shame experienced by the student before his/her peers, can have a lasting impact on a student's learning.

Suggestions for language teachers

Language anxiety can intensely affect the course of language learning and teaching. Therefore, language teachers, as the agents directly responsible for students' achievement or lack thereof, need to know that anxiety can hinder a language learner's progress and try to help them overcome nervousness and anxiety. Therefore, language teachers' awareness of the seriousness of learner anxiety, and taking due measures to address it, is crucial in teaching and learning a foreign language.

The findings of the current study, and similar studies in this field, include the following suggestions:

- 1) Language teachers should be aware of the reality of anxiety in language learners and classroom settings and are expected to implement expeditious and practical tactics to manage and overcome this problem.
- 2) A comprehensive methodology, that provides students with more opportunities to practice speaking skills, should be introduced to, and implemented in, the classroom setting in order to assist language learners with inadequate exposure to the English language.
- 3) A friendly, relaxed, and casual classroom setting coupled with teachers' approachable, cooperative, and supportive behavior should be created so that students feel more comfortable while speaking, and in general interacting, in the classroom. This could help minimize, if not wholly eliminate, the impact of the social and status gap between students and teachers in a substantial way (Tanveer, 2007).
- 4) Teachers should have the insight to encourage learners who are afraid of making speaking errors to feel free to make as many errors as they like and instill the idea in their students that committing errors is indispensable to attaining good communication skills. Teachers should refrain from techniques such as on-the-spot error correction, as such techniques result in more anxiety, and, instead, should opt for methods that would invoke the least defensive reactions from students.
- 5) In order to decrease students' fear and anxiety, teachers should give priority to using formative assessment (assessment for learning) and feedback instead of summative assessment, since the latter, as it is often conducted collectively and in public, can generate a stressful situation.

- 6) Language teachers need to talk openly about anxiety in the class and take proper actions to minimize it as much as possible.
- 7) In order to help students feel positive, successful, and accomplished in their learning, language teachers should avoid complicated and obstructive activities in the early stages. Instead, they are required to start with simple tasks so that novice learners feel contented and comfortable in their participation in the language class.
- 8) In classroom activities, excessive self-consciousness should be obliterated through proper strategies. Teachers should introduce strategies, such as role play, drama, etc. and make teaching, and learning, as indirect as possible.
- 9) Teachers' familiarity with learners' cultural background and showing genuine interest in their educational history and background can help them better understand, and treat, students' anxiety issues. It also leads to a positive atmosphere of wholesome attachment and collaboration in the classroom and helps students to practice their speaking skills assertively and without anxiety.

Conclusion

Since teachers have an important role in the acquisition of a foreign language, examining their principles and perspective with regard to learning and teaching ESL/EFL was considered inevitable by the researcher. The working hypothesis of the study was that language anxiety can be caused by, and attributed to, learners' own self-consciousness due to their personal perceptions, language learners' individual problems, differences in learners' cultural background and that of the target language, variations in the social status of interlocutors, and the fear of losing self-identity. Therefore, in order to manage the pressure, anxiety and nervousness in their classes, it is essential for language teachers to have in-service training courses on general psychology, including specific courses on language anxiety.

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