

INVESTIGATING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' ANXIETY IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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Abstrack

This paper presents the findings on the types of anxiety experienced by fifty one Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris undergraduates in learning English. They were also asked the strategies they used to cope with the anxiety experienced throughout the English Language courses they enrolled in at tertiary level. Questionnaires were used to collect their responses. The findings revealed that a majority of the students experienced a considerable amount of anxiety when learning English hence affect their comprehension of the lessons. Their anxiety also is a major factor that hinders them from using the language while communicating in class and makes them reluctant to participate in class. They also refuse to use the English language in class. Instead, they use their mother tongue language, Bahasa Malaysia to speak with one another.

Keyword: Anxiety, second language anxiety, language learning anxiety

INTRODUCTION

English is viewed as a universal language which acts as a key to acquire academic knowledge, gain access to the worldwide trade and gather diverse information on various issues.

In Malaysia, English is placed as a second language. In the Malaysian formal education system, English Language is a compulsory subject for primary and secondary school learners. It is also one of the key determiners in determining students' enrolment into higher learning institutions. Among the requirements for students to pursue their education at tertiary level are students need to get a credit in the English Language

subject at SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) level and at least score band one in MUET (Malaysian English Language Test).

As the English Language is the second language in Malaysia, it is anticipated that Malaysian students would be proficient in the language. Besides, the Malaysian government realizes that students who are proficient in the English language would be more marketable as they meet the demands of the global job market.

Despite the emphasis placed on English Language proficiency among the Malaysian students, the level of proficiency is still low. Malaysian students do not seem to possess a reasonable English literacy although they have been exposed to the language in formal education at primary and secondary level (Naginder, 2006; Nor Hashimah Jalaludin, Norsimah Mat Awal & Kesumawati Abu Bakar, 2008; Normazidah Che Musa, Koo Yew Lie, Hazita Azman, 2012).

Therefore, the Malaysian government has taken several measures to upgrade the level of proficiency among Malaysian learners. One of the actions taken is to bring in 375 native-speaking teachers to teach English in government schools. Teachers are also made to undergo short courses to improve on their teaching approaches. However, there are other factors that the government should also take into consideration when planning the measures in increasing Malaysian learners' English proficiency that is the affective factors such as learners' language anxiety. Language anxiety has been highlighted by many researchers as one of the reasons second language learners face difficulties in using the language effectively (Chen & Chang, 2004; Chan Swee Heng, Ain Nadzimah, Nurkarimah, 2012).

LANGUAGE ANXIETY

Worde (1998) suggested that more than half of foreign language learners experienced anxiety in learning the language. Kondo and Ling (2004) argued that language anxiety may pose potential problems for language learners. Learners who feel anxious in their second language learning may find their study less stimulating (Gregersen, 2005). Chen and Chang (2004) reported that second language anxiety can negatively impact on learners' performance.

Anxiety is one of the factors that give an impact on the success in learning a second or foreign language (Gardner & McIntyre, 1992). Therefore, various studies for the past two decades have been devoted on discovering the role of foreign language anxiety in foreign language learning. According to Price (1991), foreign language anxiety research can be divided into three directions. One of the directions is to re-examine the anxiety

proficiency relationship using measures designed to assess the specific construct of foreign language anxiety (Young, 1990). The second direction focuses on examining the effects of anxiety and learner variables. This study follows the third direction which is the examination of the effects of anxiety on the foreign language learner (Price, 1991).

Anxiety is one of the affective variables that may affect learning a second or foreign language. In the context of second language learning, anxiety poses several potential problems for the students because it can interfere with the acquisition, retention and production of the new language. According to Gardner & McIntyre (1992), studies related to language learning and anxiety can be categorized into three perspectives. The first perspective considers anxiety as a general personality trait that is relevant across several situations. A second perspective is interested in the here and now experience of anxiety as an emotional state. The third approach examines the specific forms of anxiety that occur consistently over time within a situation.

Although some language researchers asserted that a positive mode of anxiety exists, most related past studies showed negative relationship between anxiety and performance (Oxford, 1990). The negative type of anxiety is sometimes called 'debilitating anxiety', because it does harm to learners' performance in various ways. Learners become less confident and they worry about using the language. This makes them refuse to participate in class and avoid using the language (Oxford, 1990).

According to Tobias (1986), interference may occur at three levels; input, processing, and output. At input, anxiety may cause attention deficits and poor initial processing of information. In short, not much information is registered. For instance, people with higher anxiety seem easily distracted from the task because time is divided between processing of emotion-related and task related cognition. If the task is relatively simple, anxiety may have little effect on it. The more difficult, the task becomes, relative to ability, the greater the effect of anxiety on processing. Interference with the rehearsal of new information would be an example of this type of effect. At output, anxiety may interfere with the retrieval of previously learned information.

Mejias et al. (1991) described communication apprehension as learners' anxiety when communicating. The term 'communication apprehension' refers to an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons (Mejias et al., 1991). Communication apprehension includes oral communication anxiety, such as difficulty in speaking in groups, stage fright and receiver anxiety, i.e., difficulty in listening to or learning a spoken language. Text anxiety is considered as a situation-specific trait or state referring to examinations and apprehension

over academic evaluation (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Test anxiety refers to a type of performance anxiety stemming from the fear of failure. Finally, the fear of negative evaluation, which refers to the apprehension about other evaluative situations, and the anticipation that others would evaluate oneself negatively (Horwitz et al., 1986).

According to Horwitz (1991), foreign language anxiety can be based on situations. From his study, he reported that learners experienced anxiety during language classes. Learners related that they were nervous of being asked to present orally in front of the class and asked to give their opinions in class. Another researcher, Young (1990) reported that learners' performance in language classes was affected by their excessive language anxiety. Tran (2012) highlighted that second language learning anxiety is unique and distinctive from other academic anxieties. However, learners who experienced second language anxiety and show poor language ability were able to perform well in other subjects. It was suggested that the nature of language classrooms that involve interactions and demands learners to communicate well using the target language arouses higher anxiety level in the language classrooms as compared to other academic classrooms.

A considerable number of researchers highlighted that among all the language skills, speaking is reported as the main source of anxiety among second language learners (Young, 1990; Subasi, 2010). Many learners perform badly during oral tasks due to their high level of language anxiety. These learners tend to hesitate and stumble in their speech as they were overcome with nervousness.

Many studies revealed the significant relationship between anxiety and oral language testing. These studies suggest that students with test anxiety would experience nervousness and apprehension when going through oral tests and this will interfere with the students' performance (Salend, 2011).

Apart from test anxiety having an impact on oral test, Gardner et al. (1997) suggested that language anxiety may affect acquisition of other language skills such as listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) mentioned that beginning second language learners may experience high level of anxiety when their proficiency level is low. However, as their command of the language develops, their anxiety level would reduce accordingly.

POSSIBLE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO LEARNERS' ANXIETY

There are several possible factors that contribute to the feeling of anxious in learning and using a second or foreign language. Among the factors highlighted as the cause of communication apprehension are difficulty in understanding the teacher's instruction

and the fear of failing the subject (Horwitz et al., 1986; Pappamihel, 2001). Studies also show that students who have low proficiency in their native language would probably experience higher anxiety in learning a second or foreign language.

In addition to the above factors, Worde (1998) mentioned that teachers' way of teaching and their behaviour may also contribute to learners' anxiety in their foreign language learning (Worde, 1998). Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999) proposed that teachers consider factors that can cause anxiety among foreign language learners in planning their teaching. They should take into consideration that learners can get easily anxious during the teaching and learning process. Hence, teachers have to provide positive reinforcement and create a conducive and nonthreatening learning environment for the students. They need to always reflect on their classroom decisions and upgrade their teaching strategies to minimize factors that cause learners' anxiety.

LEARNERS' STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY

Many studies related to language anxiety focused on identifying the causes of language anxiety among second and foreign language learners (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993) and a considerable number of research have focused on identifying the elements to reduce language anxiety among learners (Kondo & Ling, 2004). However, very few studies have tried to explore and understand the strategies employed by learners in coping with language anxiety.

A study by Kondo and Ling (2004) explored the strategies used by foreign language learners in coping with their language anxiety. 209 (93 female and 116 male) learners who were studying English at two universities in central Japan participated in the study. The participants were given questionnaires on foreign language anxiety to answer. The questionnaires were to elicit the strategies the participants used in coping with their language anxiety. The findings from the study showed that the learners used 70 specific strategies. The strategies were categorized under five categories of general strategies, namely; preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking and resignation. The first category, preparation refers to learners' study strategies employed in overcoming their language anxiety. The second, relaxation refers to how learners try to reduce the symptoms of anxiety. The third, positive thinking deals with efforts in making the learning pleasant and divert from the stressful condition. The fourth, peer seeking refers to the effort made to find other students who also experience anxiety in the classroom. The fifth, resignation is the unwillingness to lessen the language anxiety.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

English Language is a compulsory subject in the government administered schools in Malaysia as it is the second language in Malaysia. Hence, students in Malaysia will be learning English as early as at pre-school level and proceed to primary and secondary level. Therefore, these students would have gotten about 11 to 12 years of exposure to learning the language in a formal context. However, the low proficiency level among Malaysian learners although after going through 11 years of formal language learning in school has been highlighted extensively (Naginder, 2006; Nor Hashimah Jalaludin, Norsimah Mat Awal & Kesumawati Abu Bakar, 2008; Normazidah Che Musa, Koo Yew Lie & Hazita Azman).

One of the factors that has been highlighted as a contributor to low language proficiency among Malaysian learners is language learning anxiety (Chen & Chang, 2004; Wong, 2012). There are various factors that could have contributed to this anxiety; learners' learning strategies, motivation, perceptions, educators' teaching methods and approaches, syllabus and lesson plan.

Purpose of The Study

This study aims to gather undergraduate students of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris views' pertaining to second language anxiety and gain data on ways the students cope with the second language anxiety.

Research Questions

1. Do students in Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris undergraduate program experience second language anxiety?
2. What are the coping strategies preferred by the students in managing their second language anxiety?

Methodology

51 students were selected to participate in the research and these students were from two groups of students undergoing English Language two course. 13 of the participants are male and 38 female. The participants have undergone the English Language one course which is the first level of the English Language course that students who got low bands for MUET are required to enrol in. These students were of low proficiency level and were

in their second semester in Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris and pursuing their Bachelor of Education. The sample consists of male and female students from various programs. This study employs the survey design. According to Creswell (2005), survey design is a research procedure that can be utilized to gain insights on the trends in a particular group. In the context of this study, the trend refers to the factors related to second language anxiety.

Questionnaires were distributed to the students to gain insights on the factors that lead to second language anxiety among the students. The questionnaire consists of 35 Likert scale statements that need to be rated by the students. The statements were divided into two categories that are 'Measuring Anxiety Factors' and 'Measuring Anxiety Coping Strategies'. The questionnaire is adapted and modified from Kondo and Ling (2004). The questionnaires were distributed to the participants during class and they were collected immediately after they have been answered.

The data collected were analyzed quantitatively by calculating the percentage of the participants' responses.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are divided into two categories that are the factors contributing to second language anxiety and learners' strategies in coping with second language anxiety.

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO SECOND LANGUAGE ANXIETY

Analysis of the data collected on the factors that contribute to learners' anxiety suggests that five factors contributed to learners' anxiety in learning the language. The factors are lack of confidence, lack of preparation, fear of failing the class, fear of making mistakes and teachers' instruction. Of these five factors, lack of preparation was the main factor that causes anxiety among the learners. More than half of the participants answered that they panicked and became nervous when they have to speak in their English class without prior preparation.

The data also indicate that a majority of the students consider that lack of confidence contributed to their anxiety. Only a small number of students did not consider lack of confidence a problem in their language learning. Most of the students answered that they do not feel confident speaking in the English language class, they feel nervous when they know that they are going to be called in their English language class and they feel shy to volunteer in the English language class.

The findings show that more than 80% of the students are worried of failing the English Language course. Clearly this shows that the students take into serious consideration of passing the subject.

Interestingly, the data suggest that more than half of the students are not worried about making mistakes in their English Language class. More than 50% also indicate that they were glad that the lecturer corrected their mistakes. However, more than 80% of the students consider peer responses such as laughing at their mistakes as a cause of anxiety. This becomes one of the main causes that affect their participation in class.

As for teacher's instructions, more than half of the learners indicate that they felt nervous and worried if they don't understand the teacher's teaching in class.

In conclusion, the findings show that all of the participants experienced a certain degree of anxiety in their second language learning. Factors like lack preparation, low confidence level and fear of failing the subject are among the major causes of these participants' anxiety in their second language learning context. Although a number of studies reported that teacher's instruction and fear of making mistakes are among the common causes of anxiety (Pappamihel, 2001). Arguably, in the context of this study, they were not primary causes of the learners' anxiety. Instead, learners expected to be corrected in their English Language class. This indicates that they want to get feedbacks from the teacher. However, the data suggest that the participants were shy to participate because they were nervous of their peers' responses.

Strategies for Coping with Second Language Anxiety

The analysis of the data on anxiety coping strategies suggests that there are four strategies used by the participants in coping with their anxiety, namely preparation, relaxation, positive thinking and peer assistance. Of these four strategies, peer assistance and relaxation were used by a majority of them in their attempt to cope with their second language anxiety. This is followed by the other two strategies which are preparation and positive thinking. However, the data show that the participants did not consider resignation such as taking part in class activities like voluntarily answering questions as a strategy they use in coping with their anxiety.

The findings suggest that there are four strategies used by the participants in coping with their language learning anxiety. These strategies peer assistance, relaxation, preparation and positive thinking are strategies reported by other researchers as common coping strategies used by learners in second or foreign language learning context (Kondo & Ling, 2004). It is important that learners identify the causes of their anxiety in learning

a second language and employ appropriate strategies to cope with the situation. Of the five strategies measured, only one strategy, resignation, was not used by the majority of the participants. Almost all of the target students disagreed to statements such as 'I stop paying attention when I feel nervous in the class' and 'I don't want to participate in my English class'. From the findings, it can be concluded that resignation is not a popular strategy among the participants in this study. The findings do not support findings by Pappamihel (2002) who argued that resignation or avoidance is one of the common language anxiety coping strategies used by learners.

Students' preference of not employing the resignation strategy is considered positive for the improvement of their second language. Pappamihel (2002) argued that learning a second language requires active learners' participation and engagement in the language to be mastered. The majority of the participants in this study might have realized that avoiding taking part in class activities would affect their language proficiency.

Implications

This study has provided information to the teachers and students that second language anxiety is a common problem within the context of second language learning particularly among low proficiency learners. As lack of confidence and preparation have been highlighted as the main reasons learners shy away from participating in class, teachers have to employ strategies that would promote participation among learners. Teachers have to lower the students' affective filter and get them to gradually develop their confidence level. Usage of various resources and materials also would be able to gauge learners' attention in the lesson as well as motivate learners to participate actively in class (Tomlinson, 2002).

This study also highlights the importance of identifying the factors that contribute to learners' anxiety. Knowing the factors would help teachers to adjust his or her strategies to overcome the language anxiety experienced by the learners. Learning English should be made interesting and fun to reduce the language anxiety level experienced by learners. Learners should be given the opportunity to learn at their own pace and mistakes should be tolerated to encourage learners to participate actively and voluntarily in class activities. For instance, Young (1990) reported that teachers who used humour in class are able to create a non-threatening environment in class that then encourages learners to take risk and reduce language anxiety among them.

Hsu (2010) highlighted that teachers' disposition and behaviour may also reduce or alleviate anxiety level among second language learners. Among the positive behaviour

that reduces anxiety level are teachers' smile, use of gestures, relaxed body position and the usage of a variety of vocal expressions.

In addition, teachers need to get students to employ effective and appropriate strategies to overcome their language anxiety. Teachers need to encourage students to use the strategies which are not only useful for reducing their anxiety but are also beneficial for the improvement of their second language acquisition.

Teachers also must raise learners' confidence level and give them encouragement to use the language. Teachers need to provide learners with opportunities to perform tasks and let them experience success in completing the tasks to develop their self-confidence.

Suggestions for further research

This study was conducted to identify the factors that lead to the students' second language anxiety and the strategies students might use in coping with their anxiety. The participants were only a limited number of Band 1 and Band 2 students undertaking various degree courses. A larger sample of population would generate more significant results on second language anxiety and the coping strategies employed.

Future research could also focus on learners of different proficiency levels. The data would be able to give a better understanding of the issue of anxiety in second language learning. Emphasis also can be placed in looking at the impact of second language anxiety as well as the strategies used to overcome anxiety on students' learning performance.

Apart from that, more research can be conducted on teachers' teaching strategies and how these strategies gave impacts on learners' anxiety level. It would be interesting to see what are the strategies that contribute to learners' language anxiety and the strategies that reduce learners' anxiety level.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that second language anxiety is a factor that requires some attention as all learners in the study reported that they experienced some level of anxiety in learning the second language. As studies have shown language anxiety affects learners' development and performance in the target language, several measures should be taken to reduce or alleviate learners' anxiety in the language classrooms.

Clearly, teachers need to identify the level of anxiety among the language learners and get them to share what are the factors that hinder them from participating in class.

Knowledge of these factors and the coping strategies used by the learners would enable teachers to improve the quality of their teaching and learning.

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