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TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH: TOWARDS AN ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

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SOURCES OF LANGUAGE ANXIETY

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SOURCES OF LANGUAGE ANXIETY

ABSTRACT

Anxiety plays an important role in language learning because it ranks high among factors that can influence language learning (Oxford, 1999). It affects not only the way in which learners perform but also the way in which they perceive their performance (MacIntyre, 1999). In order to understand language anxiety, the sources of language anxiety need to be explored.

This study was conducted to explore the sources of language anxiety from the students' (UUM) perspectives. A qualitative case study was selected for this study. The sampling of participants (students) was done through purposive sampling in order to select information-rich cases. The main data collection was done mainly through interviewing language students. Interviewing lecturers and analyzing documents were done to triangulate the students' perspective. his study found that the most cited sources of language anxiety were associated with speaking and writing skills. Another skill mentioned was related to listening comprehension. In this study, the sources of language anxiety stemmed from the learner, peers, instructional practice, personality, past experiences and language testing condition. Six themes emerged from the study. The themes were derived by associating language anxiety with three language skills, i.e. speaking, writing and listening, mentioned by the participants. The six themes which emerged from this study were belief and self-deprecating thought, afraid of being put on the limelight, afraid of being laughed at by peers, the type of lecturer or teacher, bad past experiences, and anxiety during language test.

INTRODUCTION

Some researchers claim that learning a second language or a foreign language is different from learning other subjects. Cohen and Norst (1989, p.61), for example, suggest that unlike learning other subjects, learning a language is different as "language and self are so closely bound, if not identical, that an attack on one is an attack on the other". Another difference between learning a language and learning other subjects is explained by Foss and Reitzel (1991) in relation to language learners who have the "dual task" of learning and performing in a second language class. In language tasks, you may get the correct answer but you may still make mistakes in what you say, for example, imperfect pronunciation of individual sounds or wrong word stress. On the other hand, a communication class, for example, is mainly concerned with performance. In relation to performance, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) believe that performing in a language class can be more stressful than performing in other subjects because it may challenge a person's self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic. One more difference between learning a language and other subjects is related to cognition. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994, p. 2), language learning is "a fairly intense cognitive activity" which could create problems for language learners. They suggest the possibility of language learners having "negative thoughts that do not intrude on their work in other courses" (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991, p. 297). Due to factors such as personal, cognitive, and the demands made on the language learners to perform successfully, most language learners experience anxiety.

Research has shown that learning a language can be a stressful or an unpleasant experience for learners. A case in point is the study done by Price (1991) who interviewed highly anxious students to get their perspectives on language anxiety. The students mentioned the following factors as the causes of language anxiety: the level of difficulty of foreign language classes, the poor results they obtained in language classes compared to other classes and the stressful classroom experiences while learning a language. In relation to classroom sources of anxiety, the students expressed the following: fears of

being laughed at by their peers or making fool of themselves, afraid of making errors in pronunciation, frustration of not being able to communicate effectively, and the difficulty of language classes compared to other classes. In addition, some students claimed that they worked harder in their language classes compared to other classes but they still did not do well. This indicates that language courses may be more demanding and more difficult than other courses (Price, 1991).

Another study which showed unpleasant experience learning a language was a study by Cohen and Norst (1989) on the diary studies of adult students studying a foreign language. An analysis of the following words used to describe the emotional and physical responses revealed the unpleasant experiences while learning a language. The words used to describe emotional responses to the classroom language learning were: embarrassment, trauma, unnerving, frightening, resentment, frustration, anger, paranoia, victim, and guilt. In addition, words that were used to describe physical responses were: blushing, trembling hands, pounding heart, headache, and coronary.

THE ROLE OF ANXIETY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

What is anxiety? Researchers have not agreed on one definition of anxiety. Since anxiety is an abstract psychological phenomenon (MacIntyre, 1999), it is difficult to agree on the definition of anxiety. However, the most cited definitions for language anxiety are the ones given by MacIntyre (1999), MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) and Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). MacIntyre (1999, p. 27) defines language anxiety as “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language”. Another definition of language anxiety is stated by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994, p.284) as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning”. Another definition of language anxiety with respect to foreign language anxiety was given by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986, p. 128) as a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning”. From the three definitions on language anxiety, language anxiety is considered to be unique to the language learning process.

Besides understanding the meaning of language anxiety, a description between anxious language learners and non anxious language learners is needed. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991c, p. 112) characterize an anxious student as “an individual who perceives the second language as an uncomfortable experience, who withdraws from voluntary participation, who feels social pressures not to make mistakes, and who is less willing to try uncertain or novel linguistic forms”. On the other hand, a non anxious student is usually a person who feels relaxed and comfortable in the language learning class.

It is crucial to understand the role of anxiety in language learning because it ranks high among factors that can influence language learning, regardless of whether the setting is formal or informal (Oxford, 1999). In a second language class, anxiety can be manifested or experienced at different levels. While anxiety can be harmful, anxiety in itself may not necessarily have a negative effect on language. The benefits of moderate levels of anxiety should not be ignored as it can provide an impetus to performing a task or achieving an objective.

Anxiety can be in two forms: harmful or debilitating anxiety and helpful or facilitating anxiety. According to Oxford (1999), most researchers regard anxiety as debilitating because anxiety harms learners' performance. Comprehension and production would suffer among anxious learners (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b). Cohen and Norst (1989), for example, discovered the painful experiences faced by their adult students (such as the fear of having their inadequacy exposed) when they were learning a foreign language. On the other hand, some researchers such as Kleinmann (1977) discovered a positive relationship between facilitating anxiety levels and the use of generally

avoided structures and Bailey's (1983) diary study revealed facilitating anxiety when she increased her efforts to master the French language and worked hard to out-do other students.

Since anxiety is an abstract psychological phenomenon (MacIntyre, 1999), people can only observe behavior or recognize signs of anxiety but they do not know what goes on in a language learner's mind (cognition) or the language learner's feelings (affective or emotional state) in relation to anxiety experienced when learning a language. Therefore, language learners' perspectives of language anxiety experienced while learning a language is needed in order to better understand the role anxiety plays in language learning.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Language anxiety has drawn increased attention among second language researchers (MacIntyre, 1999, Young, 1999). It has been found that language anxiety ranks high among factors that can influence language learning (Oxford, 1999). The debilitating effect of language anxiety is of great concern for most researchers because language anxiety can impede language learners' ability to perform successfully in a language class (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986). Some examples of the debilitating effects of language anxiety that have been reported are that anxious learners "achieve lower grades, spend more time studying, and have more trouble taking in information in the second language, processing that information, and displaying their second language abilities" (MacIntyre, 1999).

Studies on language anxiety tend to focus on a specific language skill. Most people associate anxiety with oral activities but anxiety related to listening, reading, and writing have also been reported (Horwitz and Young, 1991). Language skills such as writing and listening can create anxiety for some students, depending on the students' learning style preferences and skill level. Some learners experience anxiety in listening because they believe that they must understand every word they hear. This feeling of anxiety can lead to discouragement, fatigue, and a general sense of failure. Some individuals experience anxiety in writing because they find writing unrewarding. Therefore, they will avoid situations which require writing. Reading can also create anxiety especially to individuals who have problem reading efficiently or lack of appropriate reading strategies (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). However, speaking is considered the most threatening aspect of foreign language learning because it can challenge a person's self-concept as a competent communicator (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986). The focus on a specific language skill does not provide an overall view of students' anxiety in learning a language. Therefore, a holistic approach is needed to understand the language anxiety phenomenon.

There is very limited number of studies on language anxiety that has been done in Malaysia. The researcher found only three studies on Malaysian language learners done by the following researchers: Rahil, Noran Fauziah and Habibah (1994), Parilah (1999) and Aizan and Rohaiza (2001). No study has been done on tertiary students in Malaysia using a holistic approach to gain insight into the sources of language anxiety.

There are still a limited number of researches on the sources of language anxiety. Researchers have discussed the sources of language anxiety based on teaching experiences, diary studies, interviews and group sessions. Some quantitative research or correlational research using questionnaires have been used to identify possible sources of language anxiety to be further investigated. However, the instruments used tend to focus on a specific skill. MacIntyre (1995) argues that the items on most language scales tend to focus on the anxiety experienced while speaking the second language. He further suggests that besides speaking, anxiety also influences second language activities, such as

listening, learning and comprehension. MacIntyre (1999) asserts the need to find out the sources of language anxiety in order to explain the effects of language anxiety on language achievement.

RESEARCH QUESTION

One of the research questions for this doctoral dissertation is: What do the English as a second language (ESL) students describe as sources of anxiety in language learning?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant because it explores all the possible sources of language anxiety experienced by students since it is not limited to a specific language skill. In order to discover the possible sources of language anxiety, this study is approached qualitatively. Anxiety scales or instruments tend to focus on certain language skill. For example, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) tends to measure specifically speaking skill (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989).

Another significance of this study is to consider the cultural aspect with respect to language anxiety and anxiety reactions. Do students in this side of the world react the same with those in the West when they experience language anxiety?

The most significant of this study is that the description of language anxiety experienced by the students can help educationists, in general to understand language anxiety experienced by language learners. The specific significance of this study is that UUM students' insights of anxiety experienced while learning English can provide invaluable information to guide course developers when they review the English courses or plan new courses. Besides course developers, teachers in general, can understand their students' feeling of tension and apprehension in language learning context and how language anxiety is seen through the eyes of their students. Teachers should be aware that their actions can affect the classroom environment. Therefore, teachers have to create a conducive learning environment. An environment that is not conducive to language learning may create anxiety in language learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are three types of language anxiety, that is, trait, state, and situation-specific anxiety. According to Oxford and Ehrman (1993), the kind of anxiety found in the second language classroom is usually situation-specific or state anxiety rather than trait anxiety. Trait anxiety is a stable personality trait whereby that person will experience anxiety in almost all situations.

In explaining language anxiety, theories or models from other disciplines offer insights into the anxiety phenomenon. Specifically, the following theories or models from second language acquisition will be discussed: Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), MacIntyre and Gardner's Model of the Role of Anxiety in Language Learning (1989), and MacIntyre's Recursive Relations among Anxiety, Cognition, and Behavior Model (1995)

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) comes from the language learning field. The hypothesis states how affective factors relate to the second language acquisition process (Krashen, 1982). Anxiety is one of the affective variables that can be associated with a conducive environment to second language acquisition. Classrooms that encourage low filters are those that promote low anxiety among students, which keep students "off the defensive" (Krashen, 1982, p. 32). Low anxiety, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety, appears to be conducive to second language acquisition. According to the Affective Filter hypothesis, language acquirers in a less than

optimal affective state will have a “filter, or mental block”, which prevents them from utilizing input fully for language acquisition (Krashen, 1987, p. 39).

MacIntyre and Gardner’s (1989) Model of the Role of Anxiety in Language Learning describes the way in which language anxiety is likely to develop (MacIntyre, 1999). The model suggests three stages: beginner, post-beginner and later. At the beginner stage of language learning, motivation and language aptitude are considered the dominant factors to determine success. If anxiety is experienced at this time it would be based on anxiety such as trait anxiety and test anxiety that are not specific to language learning. This anxiety would be called state anxiety. After getting used to the second language context, the student develops emotions and attitudes specific to the situation, which is in learning the new language. If the student’s experience is negative, then anxiety will start to develop at the post-beginner stage. At this stage the learner expects to be nervous and perform poorly in the language. At the later stage, if the negative experiences continue to happen the learner will experience an increased in anxiety. This in turn will make the student continue to perform poorly in the language (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991c).

MacIntyre’s (1995) Recursive Relations among Anxiety, Cognition, and Behavior Model in Figure 4 explains how anxiety affects second language learning. He proposes that language anxiety can influence language learning. Horwitz and Young (1991, p.177) claim that “exactly how anxiety impedes language learning has not been resolved”. With the model, researchers are able to understand how anxiety can affect language learning. The model focuses on the relations of three components: affective, cognitive, and behavioral. MacIntyre claims that anxiety which is unique to second language which is called language anxiety can affect the learning of a second language. In order to explain the effects, he places language anxiety into the broader context of the psychology of social anxieties. Language anxiety stems basically from the social and communicative aspects of language learning. Thus, language anxiety can be considered as one of the social anxieties. Socially based anxieties have three components: affect, cognition, and behavior. MacIntyre cites an example of each component as follows: feelings of fear and apprehension (affect-anxiety), expectations of failure (cognition), and increases in sympathetic nervous system arousal (behavior). He further explains the relations among anxiety, cognition and behavior as recursive or cyclical in a model whereby each influences the other.

There are various methods of investigating sources of language anxiety. Researchers have investigated the sources of language anxiety through interviews (Yan, 1998; Zhang, 2001; and Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002); introspection, using diary study (Bailey, 1983; and Cohen and Norst, 1989) and reflection papers (Samimy and Rardin, 1994); self-reports or questionnaires (Young, 1990; Aida, 1994; Lai, 1994; Vogely, 1998; Cheng, Horwitz and Schallert, 1999; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, and Daley, 1999; and Kitano, 2001); small group sessions (McCoy, 1979); and teachers’ reflections through diaries, reports and classroom recordings (Tsui, 1996).

The review of literature on the sources of language anxiety will be categorized as follows: Learner and Peers, Learner Beliefs about Language Learning, Learner Beliefs about Language Learning and Instructor-learner Interactions, Instructor Beliefs about Students’ Learning, Learner and Instructor Beliefs about Language Learning, Instructional Practice and Language Testing. Most of the research on learner and peers have been done qualitatively such as diary studies by Bailey (1983) and Cohen and Norst (1989), reflection papers by Samimy and Rardin (1994); interview by Yan (1998), Zhang (2001), and Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) and focus group discussions by Pappamihel (2002). Research on learner beliefs about language learning have been conducted by Horwitz’s (1988), Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, and Daley’s (1999), and Levine’s (2003). Learner Beliefs about Language Learning and Instructor-learner Interactions have been done by Price (1991). Research on Instructor Beliefs about Students’ Learning has been done by Tsui (1996). Learner and Instructor Beliefs about

Language Learning can be associated with McCoy's (1979) research. Research on Instructional Practice has been done by Young's (1990), and Vogely's (1998). Language Testing can be associated with Phillips (1992), and Daly's (1978) research.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Since this study tried to explore the language anxiety phenomenon, a qualitative research was needed because qualitative researchers "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p.2). The researcher adopted purposeful sampling in order to select information-rich cases which refer to "those cases from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton, 1990, p. 169). The researcher conducted interviews with selected students and analyzed documents to explore the language anxiety phenomenon. The sampling strategy for this study was maximum variation sampling, that is, sampling which "documents diverse variations and identifies important common patterns"(Patton, 1990, p. 182). The primary data collection was done through interviewing student participants. To triangulate the data, documents such as course syllabus and course modules were analyzed and also interviews with lecturers were transcribed and analyzed.

FINDINGS

In this study, the sources of language anxiety stemmed from the learner, peers, instructional practice, personality, past experiences and language testing condition. In relation to these six factors and the language skills, the researcher discovered six themes. The themes were derived by associating language anxiety with three language skills, i.e. speaking, writing and listening, mentioned by the participants. The six themes which emerged from this study are belief and self-deprecating thought, afraid of being put on the limelight, afraid of being laughed at by peers, the type of lecturer or teacher, bad past experiences, and anxiety during language test.

In this study, the sources of language anxiety described by the participants stemmed from the learner, peers, instructional practice, personality, past experiences and language testing condition. Learner factors with regard to language anxiety came from low self confidence or lack of self confidence, competitiveness, and learners' belief about language learning. Peer pressure is a great influence on the feeling of anxiety among the participants. Most of the participants seemed to be very concerned about what their friends think of them and tried hard not to make any mistakes. The main reason for avoiding any mistakes was that they were afraid their peers would laugh at their mistakes. Instructional practice which caused language anxiety among the participants were called on by the lecturer to answer a question, having to perform in front of the class, having to deliver speeches or to do a role play and having to do a spontaneous presentation in front of the class. A teacher's or a lecturer's personality is very important to some participants in determining to be passive or active in class. Past experiences can have a great impact on some students. Majority of the students were anxious when they have to sit for a language test.

Speaking and writing were two skills most associated with sources of language anxiety expressed by most participants in this study. Listening comprehension was another source of language anxiety mentioned by a few of the participants. However, reading was not considered as a source of language anxiety.

DISCUSSION

Speaking as the most anxiety provoking situation for most participants seemed to support studies by many researchers such as (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986); (Cohen and Norst, 1989); (Young, 1986); (Young, 1990); and (Price, 1991). Speaking is considered the most threatening aspect of foreign language learning because it can challenge a person's self-concept as a competent communicator (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986). Moreover, speaking in class is "high-risk, low gain" (Beebe, 1983, p. 43). This study is similar to other studies in that most anxiety speaking activities were those which require "on the spot" and "in front of the class" performance. However, an interesting finding in this study is that some students claimed writing to be the most anxiety provoking situation compared to speaking. To these participants, message could be put across in speaking situation but writing involved grammar which could make writing not being understood.

Sources of language anxiety in relation to speaking came from afraid of making mistakes, afraid of being laughed at by peers, no self confidence or lack of self confidence, unrealistic belief that English should be grammatically perfect, shyness, and compete with peers. Three sources of language anxiety in relation to speaking, namely, afraid of making mistakes, no self confidence or lack of self confidence, and unrealistic belief that English should be grammatically perfect are found to be similar with writing.

Majority of the participants associated speaking with afraid of being laughed at by peers which is similar to findings by McCoy (1979), Cohen and Norst (1989), and Price (1991). This could be attributed to the fear of having what the students' perceived as their inadequacy was exposed (of being in a dependent and inferior position before their peers) as explained by Cohen and Norst (1989).

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