Abstract

Considered to be an important effective variable, anxiety has been found to be correlated with English-learning achievement among different groups of people in various contexts. In order to explore English learning anxiety at students at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities- Red Sea University, this study surveyed and analyzed 74 students majoring in English. The results indicated that students indeed had comparatively high anxiety in English learning. Males have higher anxiety of English classes than females. And it was also found that high anxiety plays a somewhat debilitative role in students’ language learning. Finally, the possible causes leading to such findings were discussed.

Key words: English learning anxiety, gender, debilitative.

Introduction

It has been observed that some students in English classrooms experience anxiety that results in stuttering and fast heart-beating. These phenomena, all of which are attributed to a psychological state - anxiety - have been the research focus of many linguists and psychologists in recent years.

Generally speaking, there are two approaches to the description of language anxiety. The first approach envisages language anxiety in the broader construct as a basic human emotion that may be brought on by numerous combinations of situational factors (McIntyre, 1995; McIntyre & Gardner, 1989: cited in Tittle, 1997: 11). For example, (a) a shy student may feel anxious when asked to give a short talk in front of the whole class; (b) Language anxiety as a combination of other anxieties that create a separate form of anxiety intrinsic to language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986: 128). The second approach believes that there is something unique to the language learning experience that makes some individuals nervous. When this nervousness or anxiety is restricted to the language-learning situations, it falls into the category
of specific anxiety. Psychologists use the term specific anxiety reaction to differentiate the people who are generally anxious in a variety of situations from those who are anxious only in specific situations (1986: 125). Researchers appear to differ in their views about the definition and construct of language anxiety but there is merit, as MacIntyre (1995: cited in Tittle, 1997: 11) opines, in discussing language anxiety as a unique construct because it classifies the source of anxiety for the reader. Students may feel anxiety in learning other subjects like mathematics, statistics, etc. and the fundamental motivations behind being anxious may be similar for learners in various disciplines, but the sources of anxiety will also be a unique experience for each learner (Tittle, 1997: 11).

Literature Review

“Anxiety is a psychological construct, commonly described by psychologists as a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object” (Hilgard, Atkinson, & Atkinson, 1971 cited in Scovel, 1991: 18).

Anxiety, as perceived intuitively by many language learners, negatively influences language learning and has been found to be one of the most highly examined variables in all of psychology and education (Horwitz, 2001: 113). Psychologists make a distinction between three categories of anxiety: *trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety*. *Trait anxiety* is relatively stable personality characteristic, ‘a more permanent predisposition to be anxious’ (Scovel, 1978: cited in Ellis, 1994: 479) while *state anxiety* is a transient anxiety, a response to a particular anxiety-provoking stimulus such as an important test (Spielberger, 1983: cited in Horwitz, 2001: 113). The third category, *Situation-specific anxiety*, refers to the persistent and multi-faceted nature of some anxieties (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991: cited in 2001: 113). It is aroused by a specific type of situation or event such as public speaking, examinations, or class participation (Ellis, 1994: 480).

Language anxiety, the research target of this paper, belongs to the last category, which refers to the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993).

With the shifting of research focus from teachers to learners in SLA (Second Language Acquisition), affective factors, such as attitudes and motivation, were thought to account a lot for language learning outcomes. Anxiety, as a very important affective factor, has been considered very important, and many studies have been undertaken to explore it since the 1970s. The
The major concern of the earlier studies was the causes of language anxiety. The fact that language anxiety is a psychological construct, most likely stems from the learner’s own ‘self’, i.e., as an intrinsic motivator (Schwartz, 1972; cited in Scovel 1991: 16), e.g., his or her self perceptions, perceptions about others (peers, teachers, interlocutors, etc.) and target language communication situations, his/her beliefs about L2/FL learning etc. Language anxiety may be a result as well as a cause of insufficient command of the target language (Sparks and Ganschow; cited in Horwitz, 2001: 118). That is to say, it may be experienced due to linguistic difficulties L2/FL learners face in learning and using the target language. Within social contexts, language anxiety may be experienced due to extrinsic motivators (Schwartz, 1972; cited in Scovel, 1991: 16), such as different social and cultural environments, particularly the environments where L1 and L2/FL learning takes place. Also, the target language is a representation of another cultural community; there is a predisposition among some people to experience such anxiety because of their own concerns about ethnicity, foreignness, and the like (Gardner cited in Horwitz & Young 1991: viii). Social status of the speaker and the interlocutor, a sense of power relations between them, and gender could also be important factors in causing language anxiety for L2/FL speakers. A further detailed investigation of these factors could potentially assist language teachers to alleviate anxiety in the classroom setting and to make the classroom environment less anxiety-provoking and hence to improve learners’ performance in the target language. As early as 1983, Bailey, through the analysis of the diaries of 11 learners, had found that competitiveness can lead to anxiety. Besides, he found that tests and learners’ perceived relationship with their teachers also contributed to learners’ anxiety. These three aspects that Bailey identified were supported in subsequent studies, especially in Young’s study. According to Young (1991), there are six potential causes of language anxiety which include personal and interpersonal, learner beliefs about language learning, instructor beliefs about language teaching, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedures and language tests. From this list we can see that Young, in fact, identified the causes from three aspects, that is, the aspects of learners, teachers and instructional practice, to which Bailey’s findings also complied. However, findings by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) have been the most influential. They identified three causes of language anxiety, that is, communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Based on these
three components, they also designed a Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale including thirty-three items. This scale was later widely used by researchers to measure foreign language learners’ anxiety and examine the effect of anxiety on learning in different contexts.

When exploring the effect of anxiety on learning, an important insight to which we can refer is the distinction between debilitative and facilitative anxiety (Alpert and Haber, 1960). Up to now, most studies have shown a negative relationship between anxiety and language achievement, that is to say, anxiety is a debilitator in language learning. Krashen (1985) once held in his affective filter hypothesis that high anxiety will prevent input that learners receive in the classroom from reaching the language acquisition device. Horwitz (1986) also asserted that language anxiety can cause students to postpone language study indefinitely or to change majors.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) based on a study of 97 college students that learn French, concluded that compared with more relaxed learners, those with anxiety find it more difficult to express their own views and tend to underestimate their own abilities. They also found that in the three stages of language acquisition, that is, input, processing and output, anxiety and learning achievement are negatively correlated. Moreover, there have also been some studies conducted to find the negative correlation between anxiety and four aspects of language learning, especially speaking and listening. For example, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) found that speaking is by far the main agent of anxiety-arousal, and that students with high anxiety perform worse than those with low anxiety. However, there have been some studies which found neutral and positive relationships between anxiety and second language achievement. Also, in Bailey’s (1983) study of competitiveness and anxiety, it was found that facilitative anxiety was one of the keys to success, and closely related to competitiveness.

This study, therefore, was intended to examine the general situation of students’ foreign language anxiety and the effects of anxiety on FL (Foreign Language) learning and more specifically, their performance in oral production, i.e. speaking skills. As well, a comparison of male and female students’ language anxiety was examined.

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects of the study were 74 third-year university students (29 males and 45 females). They major in English language. Their average age is 18. They all have 9-11 years of experience of English learning.
English Learning Anxiety of Students at Faculty of Arts and Humanities Red Sea University

Alfadil Altahir Alfadil

Instruments

Two instruments were used for this study. They were a questionnaire assessing students’ anxiety level and an achievement test. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. One was intended to collect personal information of the participants, such as their name, age, gender, etc. The other was that designed by Horwitz (1986). This questionnaire consists of 33 statements, of which 8 items were for communication anxiety (1, 9, 14, 18, 24, 27, 29, 32), 9 items for fear of negative evaluation (3, 7, 13, 15, 20, 23, 25, 31, 33) and 5 items for test anxiety (2, 8, 10, 19, 21). As for the remaining 11 items, they were put in a group which was named anxiety of English classes. The respondents were asked to rate each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strong disagreement”) to 5 (“strong agreement”).

The test used to assess students’ English achievement was the final exam administered at the end of the semester. The test paper included five parts: multiple choice, cloze, reading comprehension, error correction and writing, which were intended to assess students’ overall ability in language use.

Data Collection

The questionnaire was administered to all of the students. 74 copies were collected back and all of them were found statistically valid.

Data Analysis

SPSS (Statistical Product and Service Solutions) 13.0 was employed to analyze the data. Descriptive analysis was performed to compute the means and standard deviations for each item and each kind of anxiety to see the general situation of Faculty of Arts and Humanities students’ anxiety in English classrooms.

Results & Findings

The general situation of students’ anxiety in English classrooms

The results of the descriptive analyses showed that there were 16 items whose means were above 3.00. And of all the statements the 9th one had the highest index of 3.7655. The mean of the anxiety indices of all the subjects in English classrooms, as Table 1 shows, was 2.9310 which indicated that the students indeed had the feeling of anxiety in their English classrooms. Moreover, through the computation of means and standard deviations of each kind of anxiety, it was found that students’ fear of negative evaluation, the mean of which reached 3.1828, was especially serious.
Table 1. The Overall Situation of Faculty Students’ Anxiety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anxiety Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication Apprehension</td>
<td>2.8865</td>
<td>.48557</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Negative Evaluation</td>
<td>3.1828</td>
<td>2.76055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Anxiety</td>
<td>2.7737</td>
<td>.71570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety of English Classes</td>
<td>2.9310</td>
<td>.66185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The comparison of males and females’ English anxiety

Table 2 shows that in terms of either the general English classroom anxiety or each specific kind of anxiety, males’ means were always higher than females, which indicated that males may experience more anxiety than females in English classrooms.

Table 2 Males and Females’ English Classroom Anxiety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anxiety Variables</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication Apprehension</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.1899</td>
<td>.61061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>female</td>
<td>3.0386</td>
<td>.66748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Negative Evaluation</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.2137</td>
<td>.83637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>female</td>
<td>3.1535</td>
<td>.68776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Anxiety</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.9055</td>
<td>.69587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>female</td>
<td>2.6508</td>
<td>.71784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety of English Classes</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.8838</td>
<td>.65992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>female</td>
<td>2.6061</td>
<td>.64037</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The existence of language anxiety in English classrooms

This study indicates that students indeed have the feeling of anxiety in their English classrooms. And they experience more fear of negative evaluation. The reasons for such results can be explored from two aspects. One aspect is closely related with the students themselves. The other mainly deals with some external factors. In the aspect of students themselves, the existence of anxiety should firstly be attributed to their English proficiency, which was not high enough to allow them to communicate with others freely, express themselves adequately in class and answer teachers’ questions properly.

Males have more anxiety of English classes than females.

In general, females are thought to be more adept in language learning than males. Female students usually score higher than male students in English exams. Therefore, it is not difficult to state that females are more confident in their abilities to learn a language. Once they gain faith in their capabilities, they will be more ready to “approach threatening situations” (Dörnyei, 2001) in English classrooms. On the contrary, males, who have higher frequency of language learning failure, are inclined to attribute their bad performance in English classes to their low ability. However, more experience of English use will reduce their anxiety about it. Therefore, generally the gap between males and females is not very large.

Anxiety plays a debilitative role in language learning.

According to the results of the study, test anxiety and anxiety of English classes were significantly correlated with students’ English achievement. In terms of the other factors, although the relationship was insignificant, the coefficients were all negative. Thus, it can be said that anxiety plays somewhat a debilitative role in language learning.

Conclusion

This paper has presented some findings of students’ anxiety in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities-Red Sea University. It was found that most students experienced anxiety in classrooms, especially the fear of negative evaluation. Male students were found to have higher anxiety of English classes than females. Moreover, it was also found that anxiety is considered to play a debilitative role in language learning, especially anxiety of tests and general English anxiety.
References:


Appendix:

English version of FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale)

1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.
2. I don’t worry about making mistakes in language class.
3. I tremble when I know that I’m going to be called on in language class.
4. It frightens me when I don’t understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.
5. It wouldn’t bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.
6. During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.
11. I don’t understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.
12. In language class, I can get so nervous when I forget things I know.
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.
14. It would not be nervous speaking in the foreign language with native speakers.
15. I get upset when I don’t understand what the teacher is correcting.
16. Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.
17. I often feel like not going to my language class.
18. I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.
19. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I’m going to be called on in language class.
21. The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.
22. I don’t feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.
23. I always feel that the other students speak the language better than I do.
24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.
25. Language class move so quickly I worry about getting left behind.
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.
28. When I’m on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.
29. I get nervous when I don’t understand every word the language teacher says.
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.
33. I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven’t prepared in advance.

**Resume**

أجريت هذه الدراسة على (47) طالباً وطالبة في كلية الآداب و العلوم الإنسانية- جامعة البحر الأحمر، متخصصين في اللغة الإنجليزية. وذلك بغرض دراسة القلق لدى هؤلاء الطلاب. وأوضحت النتائج أن الطلاب يعانون بالفعل من قلق مرتفع نسبياً، يعاني الذكور من القلق أكثر من الإناث. ووجد أيضاً أن هذا القلق يلعب دوراً مثبطاً في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية. وأخيراً ناقشت الورقة الأسباب الممكنة التي أدت إلى تلك النتائج.