



ANXIETY LEVELS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN THE IEP CLASSROOM: A FOCUS ON NILAI UNIVERSITY'S INTENSIVE ENGLISH PROGRAMME (IEP)

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ABSTRACT

This paper is conceived as a result of research involving students enrolled in the Intensive English Programme (IEP) in Nilai University. The students consist of international students from countries such as China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, the African countries and the Middle East. In these countries, students learn English while living in a community where English is not their native or first language. The main purpose of this research is to present and establish the elements of foreign language anxiety that affect students' performance in language acquisition and language learning. This paper further aims to describe the foreign language anxiety levels present in the teaching and learning of the speaking and writing skills components. Additionally, the paper will discuss some of the challenges faced by international students during classroom practice, and give recommendations for future improvement.

Keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL), Language acquisition, Language learning, Foreign language anxiety (FLA).

1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers are aware that teaching English as a Second Language to a group of students who have very little exposure to the language can be challenging. The student is forced to use and express views using words which have never been used before. This can be both mentally and emotionally challenging for the L2 learner. Learning anxiety is an emotion that learners have to deal with every day. Research done on this issue has clearly indicated that anxiety is a factor that needs to be considered in second language acquisition (Na, 2007; Wei, 2007). It has been noted that language anxiety occurs in all three stages of the learning process: input, processing and output. Input is the first stage of language learning. Anxiety at this stage includes learners' anxiety

when encountering new vocabulary, while listening, and even when exposed to visual clues. The processing stage includes the cognitive procedures used when learning a new language (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Output anxiety follows the previous stages of input and processing. It is the fear experienced by the learners when it is time to demonstrate their ability (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2000).

Anxiety is closely connected to feelings of frustration, dissatisfaction and worry. This in turn interferes with learning (Brown, 2000). In language classes students are required to communicate and often speak in public. Students have high expectations, and the fear of falling short of these expectations can hinder the learning process especially through tests or quizzes where anxiety increases the fear of negative evaluation. It has been pointed out that variables such as, age, teacher's role, and the length of the learning period increase anxiety levels. Nevertheless, Liu (2006) in a study declared that students with an advanced level of proficiency had lower levels of anxiety. Elkhafaifi (2005) supported this by showing that older students with a longer exposure to the language were more confident. Horwitz et al. (1986) was mostly concerned with the aspects of communication. Ehrman et al. (2003) pointed that affective factors such as, motivation, self-efficacy, tolerance of ambiguity and anxiety were closely related to lower reading scores. Students also encounter vocabulary and writing systems which are different from their native language, thus, increasing anxiety levels.

1.1. Teacher Support

Ewald (2007) pointed out that a teacher's support led to lowering of students' anxiety levels. When learning, students may share fundamental traits; however, for each individual the origin of this anxiety would apply to only that particular learner (Tittle, 1997). In this research the three sectors of anxiety include:

Trait anxiety deals with a stable personality trait. Here, the student is always anxious, regardless of situations. The second is State anxiety. This is a temporary anxiety condition which occurs at a particular moment. This is especially evident when the student is required to give a speech. The third sector of anxiety is when anxiety occurs in specific situations, especially during foreign language learning (Tanveer, 2007).

In addition, learner beliefs associated with their personal judgments can influence their learning of a language (Vibulphol, 2004). These beliefs were factors that influenced their attitude in the classroom. Understanding these beliefs help teachers to plan teaching strategies (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). This was further examined by Schultz (2001). The study concluded that differences in learner and teacher's beliefs could have a negative outcome in the classroom. The study showed that it was important for teachers to understand students' beliefs as this reduced conflicts in the classroom. Diverse beliefs regarding the teaching of grammar and error correction were clearly seen between L2 English learners and those studying a foreign language (Loewen et al., 2009). Next, as pointed by Lennartsson (2008), motivation and willingness to learn were more important than social skills. The most important factor in motivation in learners is the passion in achieving goals. Brown (2000) showed that international students in the United States learn English for Academic purpose as well as to integrate with the people and culture in the country. Teachers would therefore, have to plan according to learners' needs.

1.2. Speaking

Communication is of course connected to oral and listening aspects of a language. Therefore, students with poor communication skills had high levels of anxiety. Anxiety when speaking in the first language differs from the anxiety felt when speaking a foreign language. When speaking a foreign language, the speaker has to be aware of the lexical clues, remain within the syntactic structure and use a clear accent. While doing this the individual has to think, organise and express ideas at the same time. Language teachers need to pay attention to learners' anxiety in order that they would be able to achieve their goals in the target language (Tanveer, 2007). Teacher talk is another factor in decreasing anxiety in a classroom. Cullen (1998) further explained about supportive teacher talk in his study. He mentioned about the importance of follow-up and feedback in a learning environment. However, Clifton (2006) opposed this as he believed that learners are disempowered by it. He stated that teachers control what happens, and this reduces students' responsibility as the student awaits instructions, and does not take the initiative.

1.3. Writing

Anxiety plays a strong role in the written skills of EFL students. Fu-lan (2006) noted that writing anxiety created obstacles in learners. This in turn created frustration and decreased the motivation to learn (Elias et al., 2005). To decrease anxiety levels teachers would need to have a conducive learning environment to overcome fears. Smith (2011) defines attitude as a belief around a situation which indirectly influences the individual to respond in a particular manner. An attitude is learned behavior and can be unlearned (Oroujlou and Vahedi, 2011). Attitudes are the result of situations and can be generalized.

2. THE STUDY

2.1. Location of Study

Nilai University is a private University located in Putra Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. It was established in 1997 and offers a wide range of programmes. In Nilai University, all international students are required to produce proof of English Language qualifications in the form of IELTS qualification, TOEFL qualification, ELS certificate, High School certificate and other qualifications deemed appropriate.

However, many international students come from non- English speaking countries and are enrolled in the IEP - Intensive English Programme. These students are required to sit for an English Placement Test before they are placed in the appropriate levels. The levels offered here are Basic, Elementary and Intermediate. The IEP Programme is a preparatory course designed to help foreign and local students acquire a satisfactory proficiency level before they gain admission into the Foundation and Degree programmes that are conducted in English.

2.2. Methodology

The methodological approach is essentially quantitative; however, to obtain a more comprehensive result, the qualitative method was also used. The research instruments for the study consist of a questionnaire and interview sessions. The questionnaire used is adapted from

Horwitz's Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (1983), the English Language Anxiety Scale by Pappamihel for the Florida State University (2002), which was used to determine the scope and severity of foreign language anxiety, and L2 Writing Anxiety items designed by YS Cheng in the Journal of Second Language Writing (2004). Descriptive statistics (e.g. mean and t-scores) were used to indicate the influence of the following: age, language level, and number of years on anxiety levels in the speaking and writing classes. The data collected was analysed using SPSS version 19. Next, for the interview session, a random sample of 3 students, from each IEP level were chosen. Group interviews with students from the Basic, Elementary and Intermediate levels were conducted.

3. ANALYSIS: QUESTIONNAIRE

3.1. Speaking and Anxiety Levels

Comparisons were made with the mean scores of two age groups (15-17; 18-20) and various questions in the questionnaire connected to speaking and anxiety.

Table- 1. Age and Anxiety Levels

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			
		F	Sig.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Q1	Equal variances assumed	.001	.979	-.371	.712
	Equal variances not assumed			-.381	.715
Q9	Equal variances assumed	1.433	.236	.256	.799
	Equal variances not assumed			.382	.711
Q14	Equal variances assumed	1.474	.230	-.363	.718
	Equal variances not assumed			-.685	.505
Q18	Equal variances assumed	.028	.867	-.580	.565
	Equal variances not assumed			-.650	.537
Q24	Equal variances assumed	.805	.374	.256	.799
	Equal variances not assumed			.440	.668
Q27	Equal variances assumed	.004	.949	.989	.327
	Equal variances not assumed			.920	.393

For question 1 – The sig. t, (0. 712) > a, suggests very high levels of anxiety. Chou (2011), when comparing group and individual performance, informed that foreign language learners used more cognitive skills during group presentations and anxiety levels increased when recalling previously learned information.

Question 9 – Even though the mean score for the two age groups were similar (3.3; 3.2), the sig. t (0. 799) > a, was higher than the score regarding ‘feeling sure of self’ when speaking. This corresponds to the study by Aydin, (2004) where similar reasons for anxiety were noted.

Question 14 – The sig. t (0. 718) > a, indicates that the feeling of anxiety was high. Jones (2004) in his study informed that learners are apprehensive of the linguistic mistakes they make.

Question 18 – A high level of anxiety was noted in the sig. t (0. 565) score. However, the levels of anxiety were lower as the activity was in a classroom environment.

Question 24 – Again the mean scores were almost the same (3.2; 3). The sig. t (0.799) was higher than for question 18. This would indicate that ESL students were nervous to speak to students from other programmes.

From the scores, it can be noted that even though ESL students’ mean scores did not vary between groups, the sig. t scores, however, suggests high levels of nervousness and anxiety when speaking in front of a large audience and when speaking with native speakers. Nevertheless, the levels of anxiety were lower in a familiar environment (in the classroom).

3.2. Speaking Anxiety among Elementary and Intermediate Level Students

Table- 2. Elementary and Intermediate Students’ Anxiety Levels

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			
		F	Sig.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Q1	Equal variances assumed	.414	.521	-2.681	.009
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.648	.010
Q9	Equal variances assumed	1.190	.278	.163	.871
	Equal variances not assumed			.161	.873
Q14	Equal variances assumed	4.530	.036	-1.139	.257
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.120	.266
Q18	Equal variances assumed	2.570	.112	-.043	.966
	Equal variances not assumed			-.043	.966
Q24	Equal variances assumed	.003	.954	-.023	.981
	Equal variances not assumed			-.023	.982
Q27	Equal variances assumed	6.851	.010	-.165	.870
	Equal variances not assumed			-.162	.872

Questions 1, 9, 14, 18, 24, and 27 were again used to compare the levels of anxiety among the above two groups. Higher levels of anxiety were noted when students spoke in front of an audience. In addition, when speaking to native speakers, students in the different age groups recorded high levels of anxiety. However, at the elementary and intermediate level, lower scores were noted regarding nervousness when speaking. The anxiety levels were similar to the research by Onwuegbuzie et al., (2000). In this study, anxiety at the output stage revealed learners nervousness rose when they needed to use material that they had learned at an earlier stage.

3.3. Speaking Anxiety at the Basic and Elementary Levels

Table- 3. Basic and Elementary Students' Anxiety Levels

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			
		F	Sig.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
30	Equal variances assumed	3.824	.055	-2.242	.029
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.852	.000
Q33	Equal variances assumed	2.741	.103	-.123	.903
	Equal variances not assumed			-.189	.851
Q38	Equal variances assumed	.398	.531	-.839	.405
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.218	.232
Q39	Equal variances assumed	4.361	.041	-.486	.629
	Equal variances not assumed			-.852	.398
Q42	Equal variances assumed	.618	.435	-.813	.419
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.263	.214
Q43	Equal variances assumed	.994	.323	.014	.989
	Equal variances not assumed			.020	.984
Q46	Equal variances assumed	.208	.650	-.570	.570
	Equal variances not assumed			-.504	.621
Q47	Equal variances assumed	.467	.497	-.751	.455
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.080	.288
Q48	Equal variances assumed	.387	.536	-.427	.671
	Equal variances not assumed			-.344	.736
Q49	Equal variances assumed	.323	.572	-.687	.495
	Equal variances not assumed			-.898	.377

Question 30 – The mean score for the Basic level students (2.08) was lower than that for Elementary level (3.1). The sig. t (0.029) < α , clearly points that ESL students are less anxious when they are given clear guidelines. Basic students are given clear instructions in language classes.

Question 33 – Both groups had similar mean scores (2.8; 2.8). The sig. t (0.903) noted higher levels of anxiety. The feelings of 'self' were especially strong and students had high levels of anxiety regarding their ability to remember words learnt earlier. As discussed by Jones (2004), learners who were aware of the rules and had good vocabulary skills, were, nevertheless, not confident to use these skills. They were unsure of the "cultural rules" and so lacked confidence when speaking.

3.3.1. Writing Anxiety at the Basic and Elementary Levels

Overall, there was little difference in the mean scores between the two levels of students (Basic and Elementary). The highest levels of anxiety were connected to writing sentences. The lower anxiety scores for writing compared to speaking would indicate that they were less anxious when writing. This could be because of clear guidelines and also more time would be given to complete writing tasks. Besides, most tasks are catered to suit the level of the students. For question 42, "I often choose to write down my thoughts in English", the sig. t (0.419) noted high levels of anxiety. At this level, students have lower vocabulary skills and this increased their levels of anxiety. This corresponds to the study by Elkhafaifi (2005), which showed that students with longer exposure

were more confident. The sig. t (0.671) > α for question 48 – I usually feel comfortable and at ease when writing in English, correlates with Elkhafaifi's research as students lacked confidence in their written skills.

3.5. Anxiety and the Number of Years of Studying ESL

Table- 4. Number of Years and Anxiety Levels

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			
		F	Sig.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Q30	Equal variances assumed	.067	.796	-.295	.768
	Equal variances not assumed			-.294	.769
Q33	Equal variances assumed	.067	.797	-1.656	.101
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.627	.107
Q38	Equal variances assumed	1.347	.249	-.969	.335
	Equal variances not assumed			-.950	.345
Q39	Equal variances assumed	3.317	.072	-1.254	.213
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.213	.229
Q42	Equal variances assumed	1.073	.303	-.309	.758
	Equal variances not assumed			-.306	.760
Q43	Equal variances assumed	.123	.727	.421	.674
	Equal variances not assumed			.425	.672
Q46	Equal variances assumed	.042	.838	-.846	.399
	Equal variances not assumed			-.842	.402
Q47	Equal variances assumed	1.093	.298	-1.872	.064
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.822	.072
Q48	Equal variances assumed	.508	.478	-.762	.448
	Equal variances not assumed			-.752	.454
Q49	Equal variances assumed	3.732	.056	-.643	.522
	Equal variances not assumed			-.627	.532

Questions 30, 33, 38, 39, 42, 43, 46, 47, 48, and 49 were again used to compare the levels of anxiety among students with less than 2 years of studying English versus students with more than 2 years of studying English.

3.6. Anxiety and Speaking

For questions 30 and 33, the sig. t (0.768; 0.101), were both > α ; which showed that the level of anxiety was high. This indicated that students were always conscious of the various rules needed to speak a language. However, lower levels of anxiety were noted regarding memory loss connected to vocabulary. This was not similar to the study by Chou (2011) where only 34.6% of ESL learners confirmed that it was easy to recall contents from their presentation. The study further noted that ESL presenters paused frequently especially, when switching from one section to the next. They required more time to formulate the structure or to recall vocabulary. This is further supported in the study by Zareva (2009). In this study L2 presenters focused more on content and delivery and less in communication of the material with the audience.

3.7. Anxiety and Writing

Question 47 showed the lowest sig. t score (0.064). This clearly supports the view that students were more comfortable and confident when involved in writing. This is further seen in sig. t scores for questions 38 and 39 (0.335; 0.213) where lower levels of anxiety were noted. Questions 48 and 49 pointed out that second-language learners were concerned about their ideas and clarity of thought when writing. The sig. t scores were (0.448 and 0.552). The highest levels of anxiety were noted for questions 42 and 43; the sig. t were (0.758 and 0.674), respectively. This corresponds with the earlier findings of Anxiety and Levels of English. Learners did not write their thoughts down in the second language and were anxious about their compositions in the second language. This is sometimes noted as *processing anxiety*. Students were apprehensive during cognitive stages of developing new information. Learners are unable to process and perform well in a given time (Lightbown and Spada, 2006).

3.8. Analysis: Interviews

The most common situation that made students uncomfortable was in class when they had to converse with their teachers. In most cases it was because they felt frustrated when the teacher was unable to understand them or when they were corrected by their teachers. Students opined that they were more comfortable when the teacher smiled. They preferred if teachers spoke at a slower pace and used examples or pictures to exemplify points. Eight out of nine students were comfortable speaking in English with their friends. This was because they could code switch and they felt Standard English is not expected among friends. Seven students noted that they felt different when they used L2.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, ESL students were more anxious in their speaking classes especially when speaking to native speakers or in front of a large audience. Lightbown and Spada (2006) pointed out that speaking in the target language required “choosing words, pronouncing them, and stringing them together with the appropriate grammatical markers”. The factors that could influence the level of anxiety would therefore, be connected to socio-cultural factors and environmental situations. Lower levels of anxiety were noted when comparisons were made at the Elementary and Intermediate levels. Unlike the research by Chou (2011) ESL speakers were conscious of rules and recall of learned vocabulary especially during presentations.

This study showed that ESL students were more confident in their writing classes. At the Basic and Elementary level, clear guidelines are given to students and this could be one of the reasons for the lower scores of anxiety. However, levels of anxiety were high regarding writing their own thoughts in the second language. This would indicate anxiety with regard to self.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Language anxiety can influence the process of language learning. Therefore, it is necessary for language teachers to recognize the feelings of anxiety. Teachers should:

- introduce novel learning experiences using You-tube and smart phones in the classroom (Cheng et al., 2010).
- develop a friendly climate where students feel valued.
- use a communicative approach to give learners more opportunities to practice speaking.
- set clear achievable tasks which enhance efficacy (Woodrow, 2011).
- consider individual differences, affective factors, disagreements and failure to meet deadlines when planning group work (Chou, 2011)

It is recommended that further studies should focus on relationships of anxiety with other variables such as, teaching methodology, and teacher attitude. This research is too limited to draw clear conclusions as the subjects of the study were limited to 108 ESL learners. Nevertheless, it has created an awareness of anxiety and its influence on L2 learners.

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Appendix A. Interview Questions

Q1: In what situations do you feel uncomfortable speaking English?

Q2: Are you more comfortable speaking in English with teachers or other students?

Q3: How does someone get over being nervous when he/she uses English?

Q4: When you speak English, do you feel like a different person?

Q5: Is there any advice you would give teachers so