

Language Learning Anxiety from EFL Learners' Perspective

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Abstract: This qualitative study is an attempt to investigate language learners' perspectives on language learning anxiety. Specifically, it seeks to figure out what factors make learners more anxious in the language learning environment. The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with three individuals who have been learning English for several years. Results demonstrate the causes of language learning anxiety from the learners' perspectives as well as the effects of anxiety. Implications of the study include what learners and teachers can do in order to reduce the debilitating effects of anxiety.

Key words: Language learning • Language learning anxiety • EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

Second/foreign language learning can be a demanding task for many language learners. One of the factors that make such process difficult is the existence of anxiety. Most language learners experience a feeling of anxiety in the process of language learning. Although the degree and severity of this feeling may vary from one individual to another, it cannot be claimed that it does not exist at all. The number of students who report that they feel anxious while learning a second/foreign language is surprising. According to [1], more than half of foreign language learners experience some degree of anxiety. It is also argued that language learning anxiety may pose potential problems for language learners [2]. Learners who feel anxious in their foreign language learning may find their study less enjoyable [3], which will in turn have a negative impact on their performance.

Language teachers, too, acknowledge the existence of foreign language anxiety in classrooms and how it can influence learners' performance; however, they rarely take steps to attend to this important issue. Since anxiety is a factor that can hinder learners' performance and achievement, it deserves continuing investigation [4]. Another important issue about language classroom anxiety concerns the causes of such anxiety and how learners experience it. As such, it is necessary to look into the factors that cause anxiety. Moreover, since the issue of coping strategies has not been much discussed in the EFL literature [5], studying this issue is reasonable.

Such being the case, it is crucial to investigate language learners' perspectives on language learning anxiety in order to figure out what factors make them feel anxious. It is hoped that by omitting or at least reducing those factors, teachers and educators can create a more relaxing environment, so that more effective language learning would take place.

Problem Statement: With the increasing number of people who are willing to learn English as a second/foreign language, it is really necessary to find out the factors which may hinder or negatively affect language learning. One of these factors which has not been paid due attention to in academic settings is language learners' anxiety. Most teachers are not aware of the fact that their students are not able to fully exhibit their potential because of the stressful situation they are in, or even if they know the students' anxiety, they pay little, if any, attention to it. Although some teachers acknowledge the need to make the learning process as enjoyable and anxiety-free as possible, they are reluctant to find ways to achieve such a goal, hence being unable to respond to the learning needs of individual students. Moreover, leaning anxiety can be a debilitating factor that prevents learners from showing their full potential. As a result, they may not be very successful in their language learning.

Significance of the Study: As mentioned earlier, anxiety is a major factor that affects second/foreign language learning. Given the large number of foreign/second

language learners in the world, this important issue needs further exploration with various groups of learners in different contexts. Bearing in mind the fact that all language learners experience debilitating levels of language anxiety in learning a new language and that language anxiety can cause students to postpone language study indefinitely, an understanding of its causes and investigation into how to reduce language anxiety will improve learners' performance and increase learning satisfaction.

Studies that examined anxiety and language learning may serve as a guide for language teachers in terms of helping them to increase their understanding of language learning from the perspective of the learners [6]. Studies of this nature can also provide insights into how educators can develop appropriate interventions to decrease language anxiety among second/foreign language learners. In addition, by understanding the causes and effects of language anxiety and their relationship to language achievement, strategies and interventions to boost the self-confidence of learners and lower their language anxiety can prove beneficial to all stakeholders.

Objectives of the Study: The present study aims at investigating the issue of foreign language learning anxiety from the language learners' perspectives. More specifically, the study is looking into the causes of language learning anxiety, as expressed by language learners and factors that can lessen learning anxiety. The study pursues the following objectives:

- To investigate how language learners experience anxiety in their language learning.
- To figure out what factors are more probable to cause anxiety.
- To find out the factors that (can) reduce anxiety.

Definition of Learning Anxiety: Anxiety is one of the most well documented psychological phenomena. The definition of anxiety ranges from a mixture of overt behavioural characteristics that can be studied scientifically to introspective feelings that are epistemologically inaccessible [7]. Chastain [8] defines anxiety as a state of uneasiness and apprehension or fear caused by the anticipation of something threatening. MacIntyre [9] views anxiety as a feeling of worry and emotional reaction that arises while learning or using a second language. Horwitz *et al.* [10] offer a similar definition, arguing that learning anxiety

is a mixture of feelings, beliefs and behaviours related to the uniqueness of the process of foreign language learning.

Types of Anxiety: Broadly speaking, anxiety can be divided into two types: *trait* anxiety and *state* anxiety. Trait anxiety is the tendency of a person to be nervous or feel anxious irrespective of the situation he/she is exposed to [11]. Indeed, such anxiety is a part of a person's character and hence is permanent and difficult, if not impossible, to get rid of. A person who is trait anxious is likely to feel anxious in a variety of situations. Once the anxiety becomes a trait one, it will hinder language learning.

The second type of anxiety is referred to as state (situational) anxiety. As the name implies, this type of anxiety arises in a particular situation and hence is not permanent. It is nervousness or tension at a particular moment in response to some outside stimulus [12]. It occurs because learners are exposed to a particular situation or event that is stressful to them. For example, there are some learners who feel anxious if they are called by the teacher to speak in the classroom. The good thing about this type of anxiety is that it diminishes over time as the learners get used to the new environment or feel comfortable with the teacher. As a result, although state anxiety can prevent a learner from showing his/her full potential, it is not as harmful as trait anxiety.

Causes and Effects of Learning Anxiety: Learning anxiety can be attributed to several factors. Young [13] identified six interrelated potential sources of language anxiety from three aspects: the learner, the teacher and the instructional practice. He claimed that language anxiety is caused by (a) personal and interpersonal anxiety, (b) learner beliefs about language learning, (c) instructor beliefs about language teaching, (d) instructor-learner interactions, (e) classroom procedures and (f) language testing. Other researchers [7, 11, 12] argue that in the context of foreign language learning, learners may feel anxious due to problems related to communication apprehension (e.g., difficulty in understanding the teacher's instruction) negative evaluation (e.g., fear of correction and fear of making mistakes) and a general feeling of anxiety (e.g., fear of failing the class).

Language teaching professionals unanimously argue that the existence of learning anxiety among students can have a negative impact on their performance. Onwuegbuzie *et al.* [14] believe that language learning

anxiety can influence their learning in general and their fluency of speech in particular. Similarly, Kondo and Ling [2] hold the view that learners who feel anxious may have problems such as reduced word production and difficulty in understanding spoken instructions. Hashimoto [15], too, contends that anxiety exerts a strong influence on individuals' perceived competence, which will in turn negatively affect their willingness to communicate in language classrooms.

MacIntyre [9] lists five major effects of anxiety on second/foreign language learning and performance. First, academically, language anxiety is one of the best predictors of language proficiency since high levels of language anxiety are associated with low levels of academic achievement in second/foreign language learning. The second effect is the social effect. Learners with high anxiety level are not interested to take part in interpersonal communication with others. Third, cognitively, anxiety can occur at any stage of language acquisition. Anxiety can become an affective filter that prevents certain information from entering a learner's cognitive processing system. Fourth, anxiety arousal can influence the quality of communication output as the retrieval of information may be interrupted when learners get anxious. Finally, personally, language learning experience could, under some circumstances, become a traumatic experience. This kind of unpleasant experience may dramatically disturb one's self-esteem or self-confidence as a learner.

Research on Learning Anxiety: Different people have investigated the issue of learning anxiety from different perspectives. Worde [16] investigated the causes of language learning anxiety and found that speaking activities, inability to comprehend, negative classroom experiences, fear of negative evaluation, native speakers, methodology, pedagogical practices and the teachers themselves were the main causes of learning anxiety. Kondo and Ling [2], too, found out that low proficiency, speaking activities and fear of negative evaluation by classmates were three major causes of language learning anxiety.

Liu [17] conducted a study on anxiety in Chinese undergraduate non-English majors at three different proficiency levels. By way of survey, observations, reflective journals and interviews, the study revealed that 1) a considerable number of students at each level felt anxious when speaking English in class, 2) the more proficient the students tended to be, the less anxious they

were, 3) the students felt the most anxious when they responded to the teacher or were singled out to speak English in class and they felt the least anxious during pair work and 4) with increasing exposure to oral language, the students felt less and less anxious about using the target language in speech communication.

Marwan [5] investigated Indonesian students' foreign language anxiety. His study sought find out the types of anxiety experienced by foreign language learners and the strategies they used to cope with their anxiety. The findings show that most learners experienced a certain degree of anxiety in their language learning. Factors like lack of confidence, lack of preparation and fear of failing the class were the primary causes of their anxiety. Findings further reveal that lack of preparation was the major factor contributing to learning anxiety among all language learners irrespective of their language proficiency levels and that female learners are less confident in their learning than their male counterparts.

In a similar study, William and Andrade [4] examined anxiety in Japanese university EFL classes in regard to the type of situations that provoked the anxiety, the perceived cause of the anxiety and the ability to cope with the anxiety. Based on questions used in a cross-cultural study of emotion response, a survey was conducted among 243 Japanese learners in 31 conversational English classes at four-year universities in Japan. Findings indicated that anxiety was most often associated with the output and processing (in the sense of mental planning) stages of the learning process and that students attributed the cause of anxiety to the teacher or other people. Most students felt frustrated and helpless, although students who perceived themselves as having higher ability indicated a greater sense of resilience. Other findings were that the effect of and response to anxiety were associated with gender and perceived ability level.

In an effort to explore high school students' English learning anxiety in Chinese EFL classrooms, Na [18] surveyed and analyzed 115 students from a high school in Shandong Province, China. The results indicated that students indeed had comparatively high anxiety in English learning and that they experienced more fear of negative evaluation. Males had higher anxiety of English classes than females. It was also found that high anxiety plays a somewhat debilitating role in high school students' language learning and that anxiety affects high school students' English achievement.

Andrade and William [19] reported Japanese university students' reactions to anxiety-provoking

situations in English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) classes. Overall, the findings indicate that some degree of anxiety affected 75% of the learners and that the debilitating aspects of anxiety strongly hindered about 11% of them. Another important finding is that many students enter their university EFL classes expecting to experience an anxiety-provoking situation and that anxiety is likely to significantly hinder the performance of some students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As for the research design of the study, qualitative approach was chosen. The study aims at providing an insight into the phenomenon of language learning anxiety from the perspectives of language learners. In fact, qualitative approach is the best for the present study for two major reasons. First, majority of past studies approached the issue of language learning anxiety quantitatively, employing only questionnaires, hence resulting in a lack of an in-depth qualitative analysis of the role of anxiety in language learning and how it can hinder successful learning [5, 17]. Second, given the complex nature of the phenomenon under study, qualitative approach can better enable the researcher to bring participants' voice to the study and thus gain deeper insights into their experiences of anxiety. To support the choice of qualitative approach for the study, Flick [20] holds the view that qualitative method is most effective to investigate the participants' perspectives and viewpoints on a particular topic.

Three participants took part in the study. They were adult language learners who have been learning English for several years and have been to different language classes. They were recruited based on convenience sampling, which is a sampling technique which refers to the selection of the cases that are easiest to access under given conditions. Indeed, these three language learners were the most available ones to the researcher of the study. William, a 27-year-old Iranian guy was one participant. The other one was Meg, a 24-year-old Iranian girl, who has been learning English for more than eight years. The third participant, called Anni, has been learning English for five years. It is worth noting that the names used in the study are pseudonyms that the participants chose for themselves. The data required for the study were collected through semi-structured interviews. A set of questions was developed to obtain the required information to address the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 44 codes were extracted from the transcript data. Ary *et al.* [21] encourage a qualitative researcher to merge the data pieces into categories, especially if the number of codes is large. The purpose is to come up with a more manageable number of categories and hence achieve a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Such being the case, we managed to combine the codes and merge them into a total of three categories. The three categories that emerged from the data are 1) language learning experiences; 2) causes of language learning anxiety and 3) sources of anxiety. What follows is a detailed description of these categories.

Category One: Language Learning Experiences:

The first category we came up with after combining the codes was language learning experiences. The three participants of the study expressed their feelings and experiences about their language learning, how they started to learn the language and specifically, the uses and advantages that knowing a new language has had for them. Meg, the young girl who took part in the study, enumerates several uses of learning English such as finding new friends, being able to understand her favourite songs and movies in English and the chance to pursue her studies. William and Anni, too, are interested in learning English and find it useful.

In another part of the interview, the participants discussed what they liked best about their language classes. Meg is interested in speaking activities and finds them productive for two main reasons. The reason is that speaking activities make her have an active role in classroom activities and the chance to express her ideas and practice her speaking ability. William has a similar opinion and is interested in speaking practice and specifically discussing a topic. He mentions two reasons for his preference: first, he can learn lots of new words, expressions, phrases and even grammatical points and second, speaking activities give him the chance to improve not only his speaking ability but also listening skill. Anni is interested in expanding her knowledge of vocabulary as well as improving her speaking ability. She believes that the larger one's domain of vocabulary, the better he or she will be able to speak and make himself/herself understood.

Category Two: Causes of Language Learning Anxiety:

One of the objectives of the present study was to figure out what factors language learners think can cause language learning anxiety. To answer this question, the participants of the study referred to several factors, each of which can be an important factor that can cause language learning anxiety. Meg sees language learning anxiety as emanating from several sources such as the behaviour of the teacher and his/her negative evaluation, peers' negative judgements and fear of being laughed at by other students and finally lack of preparation. It goes without saying that if individuals are not prepared enough for what they are supposed to do, they feel anxious, which will in turn affect their performance. Such finding is in harmony with Marwan's [5] study that concluded that one of the major causes of anxiety is the learners' lack of preparation. The causes Meg mentions are similar to those found in Casado and Dereshiwsky's [7] study in which the major cause of anxiety was found to be the learners' fear of negative evaluation which includes fear of correction or fear of making mistakes. Pappamihel [11], too, found that fear of negative evaluation and fear of failing the class were the primary causes of learning anxiety.

Meg also believes that listening is the most anxiety-provoking activity for three reasons, 1) the speed with which the speakers speak; 2) different intonation patterns; and 3) unfamiliar words and expressions. She also adds that she loses her concentration while listening. She notes that, "When I experience this condition I feel I'm not in the class and I lose my concentration because I personally cannot tolerate something that I don't understand."

With regard to the causes of anxiety, William has almost similar viewpoints. He contends that one source of anxiety is the teacher himself or herself. He explains his point this way:

"The teacher has an important role in making the class environment anxious or comfortable, if the teacher is very serious and bad tempered and impatient, it creates anxiety in me, makes me anxious and I always feel anxious in such environment, but if I know the teacher is friendly, patient and has good behavior and also know the teacher knows his job and knows what to do, I feel comfortable and I can trust that teacher and I don't feel anxious..."

The second cause of anxiety, to William, is students. He argues that his classmates also sometimes make him anxious. He remarks that "if I see that other students are

better than me in their English, it makes me anxious and I think if I say something in class in front of my classmates they laugh at my mistakes." It seems that he is afraid of losing his face in front of his classmates. The final cause of anxiety to William is the kind of activities that are implemented in the language classroom. As he expressed above, his favorite activity is speaking. As a result, he is more comfortable with doing speaking activities in classroom. He contends that if speaking is practiced in classroom, he does not feel anxious at all. However, if the teacher spends the class time on teaching grammar or writing, he does not have a good feeling and does not feel comfortable in such an environment. It is interesting to note that William's viewpoint in this respect is in contrast with the viewpoint of the learners who took part in Liu's [17] study. Those learners believed that speaking activity is the most anxiety-provoking activity and that it makes them really anxious. However, William's opinion is in line with Young's [13] study in which it was argued that one major cause of anxiety is the type of activities implemented in the classroom.

Another noteworthy cause of anxiety that William believes to be really disturbing for him is the tests the teacher gives. He contends that tests are embarrassing not only for him but also for other students. The cause of such anxiety is that William is afraid of not being able to attain an acceptable score on the test, which will ruin his reputation in the class. The final cause of anxiety to William is the classroom environment. He does not feel comfortable in a classroom that does not look like a classroom, for example it is very cold or very hot, not enough light, not clean board, not comfortable chairs, or if the class is very small. He further adds that he has experienced being in such an environment and that even the teacher did not like the classroom.

Anni, too, has almost similar opinions, attributing her major source of anxiety to the teacher. She argues that she feels most anxious if she does not understand the teacher well and if the teacher speaks unclearly. She remembers the type of classes in which the teacher was not able to convey his message to the students and thus left the students bewildered. The students, therefore, start feeling anxious when they do not see any improvement in their knowledge and do not see the class useful. Another point that causes anxiety to Anni is teacher's behaviour while correcting one's mistake. She prefers not to speak in an environment where the teachers attend to every single mistake a student commits and tries to highlight the mistakes in a humiliating way.

Category Three: Effects of Anxiety: All three participants believe that anxiety plays a debilitating role in their language learning and influences their learning negatively. This is in line with what previous studies on learning anxiety have proven. William is of the opinion that anxiety affects his language learning. He mentions that when he feels anxious, there is a high chance that he makes mistakes, which will result in being ridiculed by his classmates and also being evaluated negatively by the teacher.

Likewise, Meg holds the view that the existence of anxiety is a barrier towards her success in the process of language learning. She argues that anxiety decreases her self-confidence and influences her performance negatively. Such belief is in agreement with MacIntyre's [9] study that concluded that the existence of learning anxiety disturbs one's self esteem and self confidence. Moreover, Meg believes that the more anxious she feels, the higher will be the probability of making mistakes. Anni, too, believes that when she feels anxious, she cannot concentrate properly on what she is doing, which will result in her making frequent mistakes.

It can be concluded that the participants of the study are well aware of the factors that cause anxiety in the process of language learning. Moreover, they acknowledge the fact that the existence of anxiety is a factor that affects their performance negatively and does not let them display their full potential.

CONCLUSIONS

The study sought answer to three research questions. Here, those three questions will be pointed out and then answered on the basis of what is found from the findings of the study.

How Do Language Learners Experience Anxiety in the Process of Language Learning?: As discussed above, the participants have experienced some degree of anxiety in their language learning process. They are aware of the existence of anxiety in this process. Moreover, they know that such anxiety has a debilitating effect on their performance and that it does not allow them to show their full potential.

What Are the Factors That Cause Language Learning Anxiety?: The second research question sought the sources of language learning anxiety. The participants of the study discussed several factors that can cause such

anxiety. The major sources of anxiety mentioned by the participants are fear of negative evaluation by teachers as well as peers, the types of activities being implemented in the classroom and lack of preparation.

What Are the Factors That Can Reduce Language Learning Anxiety?: With regard to the factors that can relieve learning anxiety, participants argued that both teachers and students can play major roles in dealing with anxiety and relieving it. Teachers, they believe, can make a stress-free language learning environment in which students can learn the material confidently. Other techniques that teachers can employ to reduce their students' anxiety level include running pair/group work activities, removing the worry of score among students and increasing their learning motivation. The participants of the study believe that students, too, can help themselves lessen their anxiety in order to be more successful in their language learning. They can get enough preparation for each class session, be actively involved in classroom activities and enhance their self confidence.

Pedagogical Implications for Teachers: The participants of the study agree that teachers can play a crucial role in alleviating the students' anxiety and creating an anxiety-free learning environment. William believes that the first important thing that teachers can do is to remove the students' fear of tests and scores. As a major source of anxiety, to William, is the fear of test, he suggests that teachers should try to remove such fear within students and not make them worried about passing or failing the course. He adds that this can be really helpful in reducing students' anxiety level. Another technique that William encourages teachers to adopt in order to be able to reduce anxiety is to establish a friendly relationship with their students so that students see him/her as a friend not merely a teacher whom they need to obey all the time. He believes that such technique makes the classroom environment very comfortable for the students, which will in turn lead to more efficient learning. The final useful strategy that William suggests teachers to do is to make use of pair/group work activities in the language classroom. The reason he mentions for this is that when in pairs or groups, "students can feel more comfortable because they are talking with their friends and their English is the same, so if they make a mistake, they don't feel very bad and they don't feel anxious." This can be a very useful technique to reduce learning anxiety.

Similarly, Meg is of the belief that teachers have a major role in lowering the students' anxiety level. She encourages teachers to hold extra meetings with students in a friendly environment. Another thing that she suggests is for the teachers to try to increase their students' level of motivation to learn, so that they do not get annoyed by the difficulties of the learning process.

Anni, too, provides useful suggestions for teachers to reduce anxiety. Such suggestions include building a friendly relationship with the students and enhancing their students' self-confidence.

Pedagogical Implications for Students: The present study has some implications for learners as well. There are several things students can do in order to help themselves decrease their anxiety level and thus be more successful in their language learning. The participants of the study agree that one effective thing students can do to get rid of anxiety in the classroom is to be well prepared for the class activities, be present in all class sessions

and have an active role and be involved in what is going on in the classroom. Moreover, Meg and Anni both encourage students to practice their lessons with their friends in order to be more prepared. They believe that such preparation increases students' self confidence and decreases their anxiety because they know the materials well. Moreover, they advise students to try to increase their self-confidence so that they can overcome their anxiety successfully.

The present study was an attempt to obtain a picture of language learners' experience of language learning anxiety and to identify factors that cause such anxiety. It is hoped that the findings of the study can shed light into the complex issue of anxiety in learning and make educators aware of the existence of anxiety in learners and hence take steps to identify and obliterate the sources of anxiety. It goes without saying that only in a relaxed, stress-free environment can learners show their full capabilities and learn the material effectively and successfully. The following table summarizes the key findings of the study.

Causes of anxiety	Teacher's behavior; teacher's negative evaluation; peers' negative judgments; fear of being laughed at by other students; lack of preparation; fear of making mistakes; kind of activities implemented in class (speaking is the most anxiety-provoking activity); tests; classroom environment
Effects of anxiety	More mistakes committed; being negatively evaluated by teacher; lower self-confidence; losing concentration
Coping strategies for teachers and students	What teachers can do: Removing fear of tests; establishing a friendly relationship with students; running pair and group work activities; increasing students' motivation to learn the language; enhancing students' self-confidence What students can do: Being well prepared for class; attending all class sessions and having an active role in class; practicing lessons with their classmates

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research: The study suffers from a couple of limitations. First, the participants of the study comprise three individuals we had access to. Such limited number of participants may not be credible enough to investigate such an important issue as language learning anxiety. Thus, more research can be done with more number of participants in order to include a variety of voices and viewpoints on the phenomenon. Moreover, this study is a purely qualitative one in which the only data collection technique was face-to-face interviews with the participants. It is suggested that researchers employ other data collection techniques, e.g., observations and

self-report questionnaires in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of such complex issue as learning anxiety.

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