

A STUDY ON LANGUAGE ANXIETY AMONG THE ESL A STUDY ON LANGUAGE ANXIETY AMONG THE ESL UNDERGRADUATES AT THE SOUTH EASTERN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

In the process of learning English as a second language some emotional factors influence learning abilities. The emotional factors are mainly thought to be intelligence, motivation, attitudes and anxiety. Among them, anxiety stands out as one of the most influential factors in learning the English language. It can impede students' learning process and achievements. Previous research unearthed many reasons for the existence of anxiety among ESL learners. The present study aimed to investigate the anxiety experienced by the ESL students of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL), identify the factors that led to anxiety and the strategies to overcome it. Mixed methods approach was used covering questionnaire survey, interview and focus group discussion. The participants of the study included 50 undergraduates of SEUSL who learned English as a second language. The data were analyzed manually and using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Results of the present study suggest that majority of the students experience some kind of anxiety in the ESL classes and most of the students face a form of anxiety predominantly during oral tests and in-class presentations. Furthermore, this study suggests measures to rectify the situations; both students and instructors need to carefully deal with the situations that provoke anxiety. In addition, providing a comfortable, friendly learning environment for the ESL undergraduates at the SEUSL is helpful to ease anxiety.

Keywords: English as a Second Language (ESL), Language anxiety, speaking anxiety, Sri Lanka, undergraduates

Introduction

Anxiety experienced in ESL (English as a Second Language) classes can be debilitating and may influence students' learning abilities. Anxiety exists among ESL learners, irrespective of their level of learning or the language proficiency. Even highly advanced ESL/EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners feel anxious in some situations, both within and out of the classroom settings. Moreover, this anxiety affects learners' four skills such as, speaking, listening, writing and reading.

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A previous study by the researchers (Navaz & Sahna Banu, 2018) investigated the speaking anxiety among the ESL learners at this university, while the present study deals with language anxiety in general. The study of language anxiety has occupied a great part of research for the past decades in the West. Many researchers have revealed that anxiety can hinder success in second or foreign language learning.

Researchers define anxiety in different ways. Horwitz (1986) defines second language anxiety as follows:

a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process (Horwitz, 1986, p. 128).

Moreover, he considers speaking anxiety as a mental block that makes them less confident and causes stress and nervousness that affect their learning process. Hence, identifying this mental block is important to succeed in learning (Horwitz, 1986). Similarly, Spielberger (1983) describes the term anxiety as the “subjective feeling of tension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (p.15). In the same vein, MacIntry and Gardner (1994) define that anxiety can be “the feeling of tension and apprehension, specifically associated with second language context including speaking” (p. 284).

Worde (1998) claims that more than half of the foreign language learners encounter some degree of anxiety. Anxiety is a very common problem at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL) too. Based on students’ reactions, performance in English classes and from the instructors’ point of view, it can be inferred that majority of the students feel anxiety towards learning English. Anxiety can be a hindering factor that prevents learners from performing to their capacities in learning English. Moreover, it is further observed that students who are anxious express or manifest their anxiety in several ways such as avoiding eye contact, sitting at the back of the classroom, and so on. If an instructor calls a student to give an answer for questions he/ she feels very uncomfortable and remains silent. Hence, it is important to find out the factors that cause anxiety among ESL learners at the SEUSL.

Anxiety is considered one of the most negatively influential affective factors which prevent learners from successfully learning a second language. The same scenario is applicable for the ESL learners at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL) too.

Despite the fact that there have been several studies on language anxiety in the West, within the Sri Lankan context, studies on language anxiety are yet to appear. Considering the importance of language anxiety as a factor hindering language learning a focus on language anxiety becomes indispensable. In order to find how anxiety is expressed at SEUSL and identify the factors that cause anxiety among the SEUSL undergraduates the following research questions were formed.

Research questions

What factors cause language anxiety among undergraduates in ESL classes?

How do learners manifest language anxiety in ESL classes?

What are the possible solutions to reduce language anxiety in ESL classes?

Literature Review

Different researchers have investigated the issue of language anxiety from different points of view. Many researchers have found the factors which cause anxiety in Western, Asian and Southeast Asian contexts. The common belief from previous researches on language anxiety is that anxiety is the most dominant factor that influences students' performances connected with all language skills in ESL or EFL classes.

Horwitz (1986) is the pioneer who identified the causes of language anxiety in 1986. He prepared the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) listing out the factors to measure anxiety in common. After this many researchers adopted FLCAS to find out the level of anxiety in their studies. Furthermore, Horwitz, et al. (1986) explain that language anxiety refers to "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors which are connected to learners' language learning system" (p.128).

Scovel (1978) outlined anxiety as "a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object" (p. 134). Young (1991) stated that anxiety as "[...] a complex, multidimensional phenomenon. It manifests itself in students quite differently depending on ethnic background, prior language experience, learner personality, and classroom circumstance" (p. 434). Even though language anxiety is usually associated with speaking anxiety it influences all four language skills: speaking, writing, reading and listening.

Speaking is one of the essential skills in language learning, while understanding the phenomenon of speaking anxiety can make a huge influence on learners' performance. According to Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986), speaking is the mostly affected skill by the language anxiety.

In 1990, Young (1990) conducted a research to examine the sources of speaking anxiety. The researcher developed questionnaires related to foreign language speaking anxiety and conducted the research with 135 university-level Spanish students and 109 high school Spanish learners. He found that speaking foreign language was not the problem for the learners but mainly speaking in front of the students and teachers was the problem. Kitano (2001) conducted a research to investigate sources of speaking anxiety for college level students. He conducted the research with 212 students who learn Japanese in America based on the scale adopted from Horwitz (1986). The results showed that participants' self-perception

affected the anxiety level. He found that students with low self-perceived ability in speaking skill experienced more anxiety compared to those who had higher self-perceived speaking ability. The researcher also found that fear of negative evaluation by the instructors causes high level of speaking anxiety among the learners.

A previous study by the present researchers (Navaz & Sahna Banu, 2018) revealed that fear of making mistakes, test anxiety, and fear of being negatively evaluated by instructors contributes to speaking anxiety in the classroom. Majority of the students agreed that they get nervous when they speak. Hence the communication apprehension is known as the primary factor that causes speaking anxiety among ESL undergraduates. The results of the study go along with Kitano (2001) though there is contextual difference.

Aydin (1999) investigated the sources of anxiety for EFL learners in speaking and writing skills in Turkish context. Thirty-six intermediate level learners were asked to complete FLCAS and their levels of anxiety were determined. The results indicated that there were some factors that cause speaking anxiety. They were self-assessment of ability, self-comparison to others, negative self-assessment, high personal expectation and learner beliefs. Further, the teachers' reaction towards students' errors and the students affected the speaking skills.

Many studies have been conducted in EFL learning contexts. The results of the studies reveal various factors which greatly affect the performance of students in speaking English as a foreign language. Osboe et al. (2007) conducted a research study at a university in Japan to investigate the speaking anxiety among Japanese learners. As an outcome of their research it was revealed that the anxiety has highly affected students' confidence that the learners who were asked to perform in front of the classroom felt less confidence. But when they were placed in small discussion groups or in pairs they had high confidence to speak English. In 2010 a study on speaking anxiety was conducted by Tianjian (2010) in Chinese context. He examined the relationship between speaking anxiety and the variables of trait anxiety, gender and proficiency. He found that though there was not an important connection between speaking anxiety and gender, there was statistically important negative connection between proficiency and speaking anxiety.

It was found that anxiety has an influence on writing skill too. Writing anxiety has a detrimental effect on students' writing performance. According to Cheng, Horwitz & Schallert (1999) writing anxiety is negatively associated with the quality of the message encoded with individuals' actual writing behaviour, their writing performance, and their willingness to write or take advanced writing courses. Similarly, Horwitz et al. (1986) claim that students with higher levels of writing anxiety write shorter compositions and qualify their writing less than their calmer counterparts do.

Increasing language anxiety has been realized in the reading skills too. However, within the scope of the study a review of literature pertaining to reading or listening skills are not presented.

Methodology

This study was undertaken at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. The participants are second year students from a faculty. The native language (L1) of the participants is Tamil. The sampling was convenient sampling. The researchers explained the aim of the study to the participants who voluntarily participated in this research study. Moreover, among 50 respondents ten volunteers were invited for a focus group discussion to get more qualitative data to address the objectives of the research study.

Three types of research instruments were used in this research study: questionnaires, interview and focus group discussion. The questionnaire for the students includes open-ended questions as well as close-ended questions. These instruments were used to gain more in-depth information to investigate the language anxiety among the ESL learners at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka.

One of the main objectives of this research study is to identify the factors that cause anxiety among ESL learners. To investigate this research question the researchers used some statements from Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) after making necessary changes to suit the needs of the study. In the questionnaire, the participants were asked to rate the 30 items of the questionnaire which were intended to identify the factors of language anxiety of the ESL learners on a five point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. Another type of Likert scale ranging from (1) excellent to (5) very poor was used to measure the levels of ability of the skills of the participants. Furthermore, another type of five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) always to (5) never was used to identify the anxiety of the learners in the classroom context.

Findings

Respondents' details

The respondents are second year undergraduate students of a faculty of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Their ages range from 22 to 25. Fifty students participated in the study and of them 33 are female students and the rest are male.

Preference to learn English

At the questionnaire survey students were asked about their willingness to learn English language as the same way they like other subjects at the university. Only 32% of the students expressed that they like learning English and the reasons given by them are given in table 1.

Table 1: Reasons for liking the English subject

English is an easy language
Learning English helps getting jobs easily
Students are eager to learn English
English is an International language
English is an important language
Learning English helps improve life
Students like English in order to develop reading, writing, listening and speaking skills.

On the other hand, majority of the students (68%) did not like learning English subject and stated different reasons for their dislike as tabled in table 2 below.

Table 2: Reasons for disliking the English subject

Students lack interest to study English
Students' language proficiency is limited
Students didn't get basic knowledge in schools
English is very difficult to learn
Students feel fear and nervous to study English because of lack of basic knowledge
Understanding English lessons is very difficult compared to other subjects
Learning English vocabularies is very difficult
Students have no one to motivate learning English

Preference to learn English at schools

When the students were asked whether they liked to learn English during their school days only 20% of the students stated they liked. They further stated that they were interested to study English and found the text books were simple and easy to follow. Some of them claimed that English was their favourite subject and had felt the importance of learning English at schools too.

Conversely, 80% of the students who disliked learning English at schools came out with different reasons such as they did not have a good teacher for the subject, their basic language proficiency was poor, as a result they felt that the subject was difficult for them. Moreover, they were not interested to study English nor were they motivated to learn English.

Students' experience of language anxiety in ESL classes

Nearly 98% of the students stated that they have experienced anxiety during English lessons. Many students feel nervous, tension, worry or apprehension in different situations. Anxiety is felt as a kind of excitement or fear when they were asked any question, asked to make a speech or a presentation. In the survey, students reported several situations when they felt anxiety in the ESL classes and are given in the order mostly felt to least:

During oral tests

During oral presentations and other oral activities

When an instructor asks questions suddenly

When they describe a picture

When they read in front of the students

During written examinations

Despite their expression of anxiety during oral presentations, students treat oral presentations and picture description activities important. Out of other oral activities, storytelling and role plays are least favourable activities in the class. They also stated that they like group discussions in the classrooms.

Frequency of feelings of anxiety in the ESL classes

In the questionnaire survey, students were asked how often they felt anxiety in the ESL classes. Out of the five scale from always to never, around 50% of the students selected 'sometimes' and 12% opted for 'often'. None of them selected "never". The figure 1 below shows the students' responses.

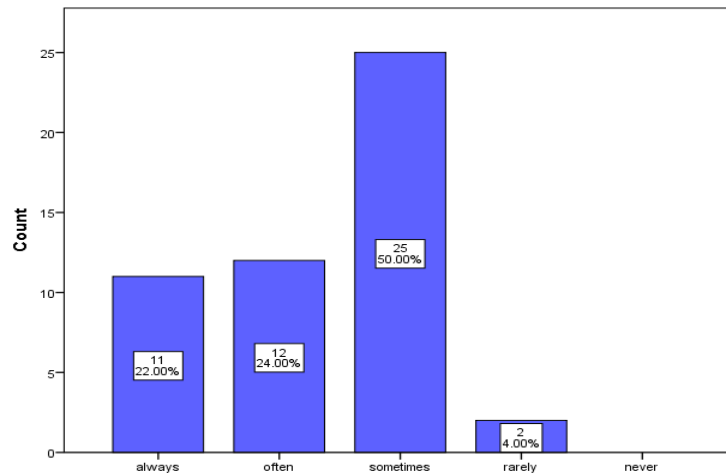


Figure 1 Frequency of students' language anxiety

How do the students behave when they are anxious?

When students feel language anxiety they express certain behaviour. This is called manifestation of students' language anxiety. The manifestation of language anxiety can be categorized in to two kinds. One is positive manifestation such as increased motivation despite high anxiety. The second is negative manifestation such as freeze up, shaking, sweating, and accelerated heartbeat. In this study, students expressed that they feel hesitation, panic and freez up.

The findings of the present study reveal that ESL students manifest anxiety in ESL classroom in different ways. The reactions which were given by the students when they are anxious are given in the figure below.

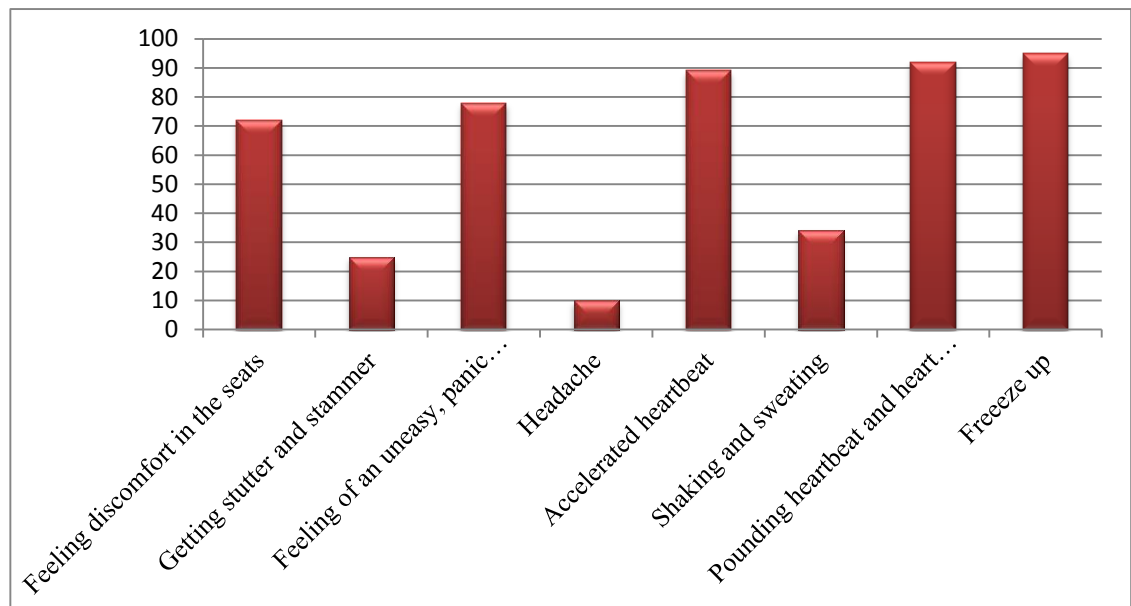


Figure 2: Manifestation of language anxiety

Furthermore, students mentioned some additional reactions that they feel such as remaining silent and sweaty hands. A student stated that when she is stuck with any

written or spoken questions, her hands naturally get wet and after that she is not able to do the activity.

What factors cause anxiety among undergraduates in ESL classes?

The main question of this research study is identifying the factors that cause anxiety among ESL undergraduates at the SEUSL.

Communication apprehension

The findings from interview and Focus Group Discussions reveal several factors that cause anxiety in classrooms like fear of making mistakes, test anxiety, fear of being negatively evaluated by the instructor, and fear of speaking English in classes. Ninety percent of the students agreed that they feel nervous when they speak. Hence, the communication apprehension is known as the primary factor that causes anxiety among ESL undergraduates. The findings of the study reveal that the students like to have classroom activities as in dyads or groups. They further reported that while they work in groups or pairs they feel less anxious in the classroom. Moreover, to reduce this communication apprehension, the instructors want to create a friendly environment in the classroom and give confidence and motivation to the students. It is notable that emphasis on oral presentations in the ESL classroom can be particularly exacerbating the anxiety of those students who have communicative apprehension.

What strategies can be used to successfully cope with anxiety in ESL classes

Students adopted different strategies to overcome language anxiety in the classroom. Sixty percent of students mentioned that an effective ways to reduce language anxiety was to develop positive thinking and self-confidence. In addition, the students stated that sharing the problems in speaking with the instructor or peers is an effective way to control anxiety. Practising speaking activities with familiar topics, participating more in speaking activities in classroom are some other measures adopted by students.

Moreover, the students mentioned some strategies to overcome this speaking anxiety such as avoiding eye contact with the instructor, finding seats at the back, pretending as an innocent student to instructor, making prayers, starting to write when the instructor is ready to ask questions, smiling and nodding head when the instructor asks questions, looking in the book and start flipping through book, remaining silent, and seeking help from friends. The responses of the students are given in the following figure 3.

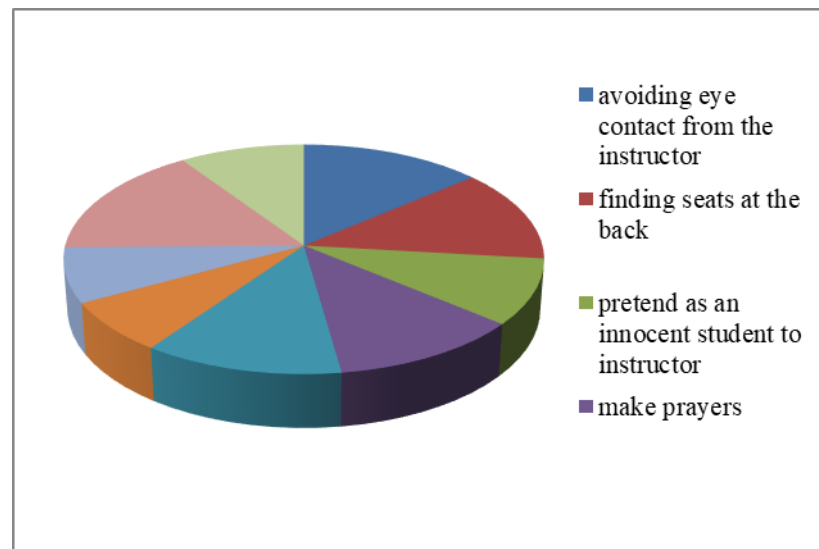


Figure 3: Strategies to cope with language anxiety

Suggestions to overcome the anxiety in ESL classes?

This study attempted to identify the ways of overcoming the anxiety from the students' points of views. The responses of the students are given in figure 4.

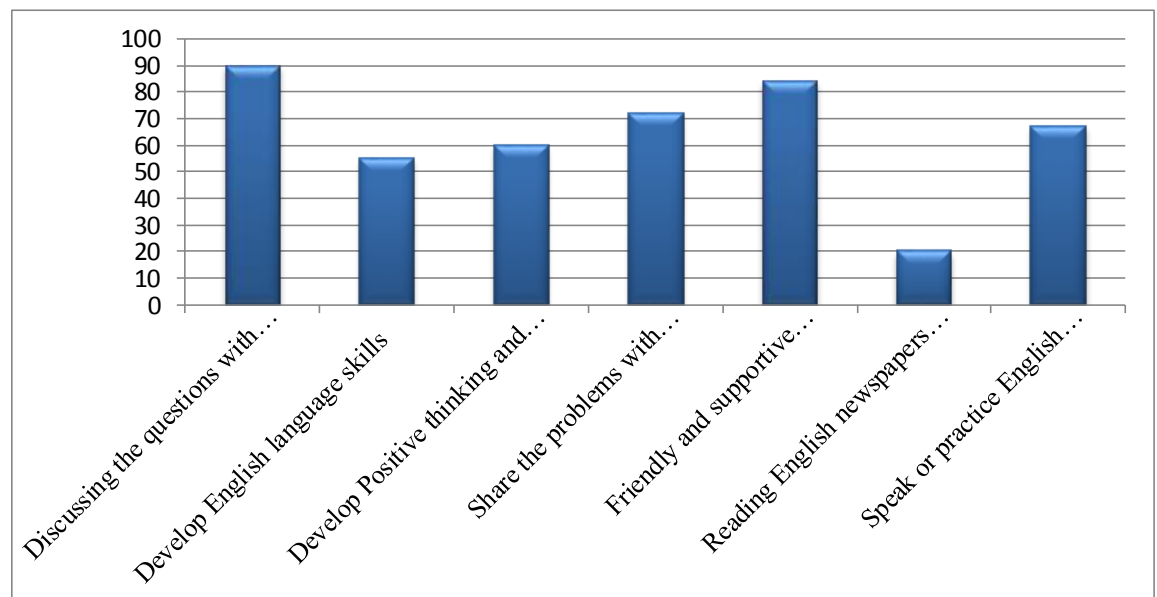


Figure 4: Solutions for reducing language anxiety

Students mentioned that discussing the questions with the instructors or sharing the task with peers would alleviate anxiety. Friendly and supportive environment also would help them overcome the language anxiety.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:

Generally anxiety is defined as an unpleasant emotional state or condition. Many researchers defined the term anxiety in different perspectives. Anxiety occurs in various situations such as classroom, public speaking, interviews and so on. This study focuses on the anxiety that occurs in language classrooms. In the process of researching the factors that cause language anxiety in ESL classrooms, many researchers adopted the model developed by Horwitz, known as Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which was used by Horwitz and his colleagues to measure the anxiety level of the students in their foreign language classes. From their study they found that three major components which provoke language anxiety in the EFL classroom. They are known as communication apprehension (CA), fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. In the same vein, this research investigates the students' language anxiety in ESL classes. Hence, this is the first research which investigates the factors that cause language anxiety among ESL undergraduates in Sri Lanka.

This current study investigates factors of language anxiety in ESL classes, the manifestation experienced by the learners and the solution to overcome the language anxiety in ESL classroom. The factors which were found from this research study are communication apprehension, fear of language lectures, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluations, environmental factors and fear of instructors. Among the factors, the communication apprehension is in the highest level to cause anxiety among ESL learners. Moreover, the manifestation of language anxiety is revealed through feeling discomfort in the seats, getting stammer, freeze up and so on.

As solutions to overcome language anxiety students prefer discussing the questions with friends and prefer a friendly and supportive classroom environment. Additionally, this research study investigated the strategies to overcome the language anxiety. Students use many strategies such as avoiding eye contact with the instructor, finding seats at the back, pretending as an innocent student to the instructor, making prayers, etc.

The future research study on language anxiety could involve more number of samples and analyze how different language skills are influenced by language anxiety. In addition it can also delve into various strategies that can be adopted to overcome the language anxiety. The present study has provided significant insight into language anxiety of students at the SEUSL. The proper understanding of language anxiety that exists among the SEUSL students and the strategies they use to manage the anxiety is useful for instructors who can help students to reduce anxiety and increase confidence on language learning. Hence, a stress free and anxiety free atmosphere may help learners learn the language effectively and successfully.

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