

Case Studies of Highly Anxious Undergraduate EFL Students in a University in Bangkok

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Abstract: While most research on foreign language anxiety established its debilitating effect on learners' language performances, few others are actually grateful for its facilitating effect. In an EFL classroom of undergraduate students in a university in Bangkok, a survey was conducted using Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to determine their level of foreign language anxiety (FLA). The data obtained were analyzed using SPSS; specifically, descriptive analysis to identify students who reported experiencing very high level of anxiety. Using case studies, three students with high, intermediate and low English language proficiencies were invited to take part in our individual interviews to shed light on their perspectives with regards to foreign language anxiety. The interview data were thematized accordingly and it was found out that there are some anxiety factors similar among the participants such as native language's grammatical structure and teacher-induced anxiety, i.e., teacher persona and teaching styles. Other factors varied according to the learners' exposure to English language, learner characteristics, and peer-induced anxiety. The results have some practical implications to language teaching in Thailand.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, foreign language anxiety, university

Introduction

Affective factors such as efficacy, empathy and introversion [5] as well as personality factors including self-esteem, risk-taking, extroversion, motivation and anxiety [17] have been studied over the years for playing an important role in language learning process. Since then anxiety has been identified to have a huge impact on second/foreign language acquisition.

For instances, Pan, Nut and Namtan (pseudonyms) believe that their anxiety felt while learning English have either positive or negative effects on their language acquisition. Namtan, an A student who can communicate well in English admits that her fear to commit a mistake during her English language class drives her to be very attentive in class. In contrast, Pan's anxiety can result to forgetting what she ought to say resulting to her withdrawal from any speaking tasks. Meanwhile, Nut identifies gestures and facial expressions as causes of his anxiety leading to his inhibitions to do speaking activities.

This study, by using case studies, attempts to understand the students' experiences (see above examples) with regards to anxiety in using English as the main language of instruction and communication in an undergraduate EFL class in a university in Bangkok. The study aims (1) to find out the factors that affect the students' anxiety in a Thai EFL class, and (2) to know some ways on how language teachers can reduce FLA based on students' perspectives.

1. Background of the study

Since the 80s, research on foreign language anxiety (FLA) has established its debilitating effects on foreign language production and performances. Negative effects of anxiety resulted to lower grades among Japanese students [1]; pervasive or subtle effect on language processing specifically on input, processing and output [15]; longer pauses affecting the fluency of speech among Croatian undergraduate EFL learners (Djigunovic, 2006); and, unwillingness to communicate [13]. Moreover, language anxiety may negatively affect self-esteem, self-confidence and impedes language acquisition [7].

FLA, as widely defined, is a “distinct complex self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behavior related to classroom language and learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process” [10]. Accordingly, three components of FLA, based on factor analysis (of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale – FLCAS) yielded three components such as communication apprehension as “fear of communicating with other people”; test anxiety as a result of “fear of failure”; and, fear of negative evaluation as “apprehension of other’s evaluation” to the learner. Other researchers identified the following as anxiety-provoking sources: learner-related, instructor-related, and instructional practice-related (Young, 1994), negative feedback in the classroom, English native teachers and speakers, learning styles, learning environment, ability to comprehend, among others [18] (Reid, 1995; Oxford, 1999; Phillips, 1999).

The most anxiety provoking situation in foreign language learning is speaking [22], (Huang, 2004), [4-3]. This is reflected in the students’ utterances below.

“I always feel nervous when speaking English.”

“I feel bad in my mind because I wonder why I can’t speak English very well.”

“My English appear is not good enough; I can’t express very well.”

“Sometimes I feel stupid, some people look at me, a strange man, cannot speak good.” [19]

While the bulk of FLA research consistently determined its debilitating effects using statistical relationships and interviews (see above examples), [11] indicated that FLA has its facilitating effects to some learners which can lead to improve performance. He observed that students who experienced high level of ‘facilitating anxiety’ tended to use certain English semantic structures others avoided to use. In the 60’s, Alpert an Haber created an achievement-anxiety scale which has been used to indicate if anxiety facilitates or debilitates test performance, i.e., *Nervousness while taking a test helps me do better*. (See [2]).

Recent studies in FLA have shifted from purely quantitative analysis of data (Cheng, 1999) to qualitative analysis [20] and mixed methods - both quantitative and qualitative (Al-saraj, 2013); [6-21]. Accordingly, qualitative method allows in-depth understanding of learner experiences in specific anxiety situations [20]; (Al-saraj, 2013).

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

Three students from a larger group of 45 students who are currently enrolled in the author’s English class participated. These students reported experiencing very high level of anxiety ($M= 4.0, 4.13, \text{ and } 4.23$, respectively) and with differing English language proficiencies – high, intermediate and low.

Table 1: Information about the participants

Participant	Anxiety level (Mean)	English language proficiency level
Participant A	4.0	High proficiency
Participant B	4.13	Intermediate proficiency
Participant C	4.23	Low proficiency

2.2 Procedures

The author distributed the widely-used foreign language anxiety scale known as Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS, see Appendix 1) in the classroom. The data from the survey were analyzed using SPSS, specifically, descriptive analysis. Students who are categorized with low, intermediate and high English language proficiency based on their English course grades in the previous semester and who reported experiencing very high level of anxiety were selected.

Separate individual interviews were conducted once for each of the three participants. The data were thematized accordingly and emerging themes were created. Thereafter, a colleague at the Institute cross-checked the proposed themes.

3. Results and Discussions

Separate individual interviews for the selected participants were conducted to obtain data regarding foreign language anxiety in the researcher's classroom. Using thematic analysis, the following themes emerged and are discussed below.

3.1 Group views on factors that induced anxiety

There are two factors identified by all participants which can trigger anxiety in the classroom. These are the participants' native language structure and teacher-induced anxiety.

3.1.1 Native's language structure

All of the participants revealed that Thai language's contrasting structures with that of the target language – English make them feel highly anxious. For example, Participant A illustrated the phonological disparities in accents, tones, intonations, among others. Specifically, rising intonation is more common in Thai and that most students adopt it to English language words, i.e., computer. Also voiceless fricatives in initial position such as /sh/ and /th/ as well as those in final position /θ/, /s/, among others impose great difficulty for Thai students. Participant B stated that:

“Our class focuses on speaking presentations and every single word I know I mispronounced spikes my anxiety. Sometimes, I need to stop talking and/or automatically restart my talk to correct myself.”

“I automatically say /sa/chool, /sa/tudy and Engli/t/. I know that my pronunciation is different because my teacher usually smiles. So as a rule, I have to say the word/s again.” (Participant B)

Thai students' experiences are similar to other L2 learners with regard to their native languages' structures. In Saudi Arabia, Flege [9] confirmed that the learners' production of sounds in the word-final and -initial were similar to Arabic. Also, Gonzalez-Bueno [8] found that Spanish learners have difficulty in producing the reduced aspiration of Spanish voiceless stops.

3.1.2 *Teacher-induced anxiety*

Another factor identified by the participants is the teacher's persona, i.e., teaching styles and techniques. The quotes below illustrate the issue.

"It doesn't matter whether the English teacher is Thai or native speaker. Whenever I sense that the teacher raises an issue about my word/presentation, I feel very very excited." (Participant A)

"I am not very good in English and I have to accept that fact. That's why if the foreign teacher cannot translate the lesson into Thai, I feel very nervous. I always talk to my seatmate or refer to my electronic dictionary. However, if the teacher forbids me to talk with my friend and/or use my dictionary, I feel that my world will collapse." (Participant C)

"Whenever the teacher, for example, assigns group work and group the students randomly, I feel very anxious if all my group mates are low ability students and/or high ability students." (Participant B)

As illustrated by the participants' thoughts above, corrective feedback triggers anxiety. Lightbown and Spada [12] suggested using explicit or implicit correction. For instance, in the sentence "*He go to school everyday*", the teacher may explicitly correct the utterance by pointing out that the verb is wrong and it has to be '*goes*' to follow subject-verb agreement; and/or implicitly say "*He goes to school everyday*".

Apart from feedback, teaching techniques and styles, and classroom activities are identified as situations which can induce anxiety among the learners.

3.1.3 *Individual views on anxiety*

Based the participants' personalities and experiences, three subthemes are deduced including English language exposure, learner characteristics and peer-induced anxiety.

3.1.3.1 *English language exposure*

Participant A conceded that her anxiety in using English is stable. However, the anxiety level she feels during a specific task increases immediately. She noted that her attendance to English language tutorial classes in her primary and secondary education contributed much to her positive views towards the English language. Although she feels nervous at the beginning, her anxiety subsides eventually.

As compared with Participant A, Participants B and C have limited exposure to English language.

"Although we are living in Bangkok, we have no chance to speak English in a real life setting. We have a lot of assignments such as reading, presentations and quizzes. And it takes time for us to understand the lesson. Unlike some of our friends who had experiences travelling and studying abroad, we seemed to need a whole day to understand and produce the target language." (Participant B and C)

Participant A’s experience is an exact description of FLA’s situation specific anxiety [14]. Although anxiety is a stable disposition (see also state anxiety), the degree of anxiety varies in response to differing situations where the learners are being exposed to. Such exposure(s) can affect language processing – input, processing and output [15].

3.1.3.2 Learner characteristics

The following differences among the participants’ characteristics include perfectionism (accentedness of speech, cannot make sentences, cannot pronounce words), ability (committing mistakes, forgetting words, my turn is coming, lack of preparation), environmental awareness (reactions of friends and teacher) and competitiveness (speaking in front of the class).

Table 2 lists situations which can directly trigger anxiety. Accordingly, Participant A is anxious due to her inability to produce a ‘perfect’ speech like that of a native speaker. Her belief of the existence of ‘native-speaker’ model led to her to say that mispronounced words are all but ‘mistakes’. While accentedness of speech is not causing anxiety for Participants B and C, the teacher’s signal (facial expression or gesture) that they have mispronounced and/or committed a serious mistake can result to a higher degree of anxiety.

Table 2. Situations causing high anxiety for students

Situation	High	Intermediate	Low
Accentedness of speech	/		
Cannot make perfect sentences	/	/	/
Cannot pronounce words	/	/	/
Committing mistakes	/	/	/
Forgetting words			/
My turn is coming		/	/
Lack of preparation		/	/
Reaction of friends			/
Reaction of teacher		/	/
Speaking in front of the class			/

At most, Participants B and C experiences the above situations (see Table 2) except for forgetting words, reaction of friends and speaking in front of class for the learner with intermediate English proficiency. In summation, Participant C’s earlier reflection that her ‘world collapses’ can be related to the above anxiety provoking situations.

3.1.3.3 Peer-induced anxiety

Literature on anxiety reveals that negative evaluation by others directly causes anxiety (Al-saraj, 2013); [3-10]. The interview data extracted from the participants provide a clear illustration.

“I’m always afraid being laugh at if I mispronounced the word/s incorrectly. Moreover, if my friends helped me a lot to prepare and yet I cannot do the task, I feel so embarrass.” (Participant A)

“Some of my friends are very supportive of me. But whenever someone makes an inappropriate gesture or facial expression (even though it is not a response to what I

am doing), I usually interpret it as a mistake and so I sometimes prefer to discontinue my assigned task.” (Participant B)

“When no one is listening.” (Participant C)

Based on the participants’ reactions above, peers play a significant role on foreign language anxiety. Such experiences are related with Horwitz et al’s fear of negative evaluation.

3.2 Alleviating anxiety in the classroom

During the individual interviews, the participants suggested the following actions (see Table 3). By allowing smartphone-use during the lesson, the low proficient student may able to translate some words on his own. So it is not surprising to have ‘translation’ as the most recommended step to reduce anxiety during lessons. This is related with the learners’ belief that translation is the ultimate answer to incomprehensibility, which is directly rooted from their past education experiences where ‘some teachers automatically used Thai language to explain the lesson’ (Participants A, B and C).

Table 3. Students’ recommendations to alleviate anxiety

Actions	Benefits
Allow smartphones	Translation of words
Ask the students to prepare	Sufficient time to prepare
Explain how words can be used in Thai	Correction of translation from L1*
Explain vocabularies	Correction of translation from L1
Have a consultation after class	Individual consultation lessens anxiety
Include games	Active learning
Include more songs and movies	Vocal and listening exercises
Upload slides a day before the class	Translation of lesson’s concepts

*L1 means first language

Based on the above findings, L1s structure against the target language imposes a mounting task for Thai students to learn English. And so most of the students use translation method in their attempt to comprehend the lesson. However, it does not mean that teachers are obliged to spoon-feed the students (by providing *in toto* translation as suggested). For example, Participant C suggested three things: translation of English lessons into Thai, free-use of bilingual dictionary in the classroom, and referral to knowledgeable friends. While it is possible to meet their demands in order to help themselves, the culture of dependence may be cultivated. Similar to Participant B’s experience, friend-dependence may result to the lower ability learner’s reluctance to participate in classroom discourse as he/she may rely to his/her friends to do an assigned task.

Corresponding to the students’ recommendations, Matsuda and Gobel [16] suggested using various activities such as pair work, small group work, games, and role plays to establish an unthreatening classroom atmosphere and that speaking with a small number of people than confronting the whole class may be less anxiety provoking situation.

The preference of ‘native-speaker’ model is an example of mismatch of the learner’s beliefs and, for instance, the lesson’s objectives. Exposing students with different speakers of Englishes may make them more comfortable with their (Thai accented) spoken output. However, there is a need to draw a line between language accuracy versus comprehensibility. For instance, in writing, students must know that language accuracy is

needed for comprehensibility. Unlike in speaking activities, speakers are given immediate opportunity to clarify the meaning of their utterances whenever incomprehensibility arises. In some cases, highly proficient students may prefer corrective feedback but lower proficient students may opt not to have any feedback at all. Among other situations presented earlier, this situation illustrates how a class could be diverse. Such diversity needs a thorough and careful consideration by the language teacher.

4. Conclusion and Implications

The case studies shed light on foreign language anxiety experienced by the selected participants from an undergraduate EFL classroom in a university in Bangkok. The descriptive analysis of data paved way for the selection of three highly anxious participants with low, intermediate and high proficiencies in English language. Using case studies, the participants revealed a deeper understanding on their experiences.

Based on the students' insights, the following are recommended. (1) Language teachers may necessarily be aware of the anxiety levels of the students in response to class activities. Language teachers may need to boost up students self-confidence by encouraging and praising their outputs. (2) It is not wrong to allow students to confer with their friends with higher English language proficiency. However, the teacher may need to identify situations where there is a dire need for a friend-talk so as to balance the challenges of learning a foreign language. (3) Expose students to different accents to adjust their ears to both native and non-native speakers. (4) There is a need to create a comfortable atmosphere for language learning to reduce anxiety provoking situations in the classroom. (5) Develop a learner language profile which is readily accessible for language teachers in the department.

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Appendix 1. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English.
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in English class.
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in English class.
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English classes.
6. During English 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 English than I am.
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my English class.
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.
10. I worry about consequences of failing my English class.
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over English classes.
12. In English class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in English class.
14. I would not be nervous speaking English 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 English class, I feel anxious about it.
17. I often feel like not going to my English class.
18. I feel confident when I speak in my English class.
19. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in my English class.
21. The more I study for an English test, the more confused I get.
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for English class.
23. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.
24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.
25. English class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in my other classes.
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.
28. When I am on my way to English class, I feel very sure and relaxed.
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak English.
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.
32. I would probably feel comfortable around the native speakers of English.
33. I get nervous when the English teacher ask questions which I haven't prepared in advance.