

## Classroom Dynamics in EFL Context: Does It Minimize Learner Anxiety and Develop Learner Autonomy in a Collaborative Learning Environment?

**M. Shajedul Arifeen**  
Department of Languages  
Bangladesh Agricultural University  
Mymensingh 2202  
Bangladesh  
[ms.arifeenbau@gmail.com](mailto:ms.arifeenbau@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This study tries to investigate the implementation of classroom dynamics and its impact on learner anxiety and on the development of the learners' autonomy in a collaborative EFL learning environment. To this aim, classroom dynamics and learning anxiety inventories were completed on 240 EFL learners. The results of Pearson correlation analysis revealed that classroom dynamics developed a sense of collaboration among the learners implying learner autonomy to EFL learning. The results also indicated that classroom dynamics was highly applied in learners' collaborative EFL learning and accelerated learners' performance in the EFL classroom. The findings also revealed that classroom dynamics is remarkably associated with learner autonomy and to the minimization of the factors associated with learners' anxiety.

**Keywords:** English as Foreign Language (EFL), Classroom dynamics, Learner anxiety, Collaborative learning, Learner autonomy

### Introduction

Language teaching and learning have been faced with fundamental shifts due to dissatisfaction with the existing methods and approaches and led the teachers and language trainers develop their individual techniques known as Classroom dynamics. It is quite impossible for a teacher to follow a specific approach; rather s/he develops a new approach based on their intuitive ability and avoids teaching techniques that change according to the current fad. Thus, classroom dynamics is a term to indicate quality of learning environment, which includes everything from the premises where a class is taught to the whole range of interactions between class participants. In other words, it tends to instill in learners a sense of belonging and empathy much needed to establish supportive and sustainable group rapport. According to Stevick (1980),

“what goes inside and between the learners in the classroom” is classroom dynamics. It is especially important for adult second/ foreign language (L2) learners, as they are fully aware of their purpose of acquiring desired skills in a foreign language, although victimized by a number of negative traits like anxiety, nervousness and insecurity.

To Ohata (2005), anxiety is divided into three types: **state, trait, and language**. The first type of anxiety, state anxiety, occurs under the specific situations and conditions that a learner experiences. The second type of anxiety, trait anxiety or general one (Ozuturk & Hursen, 2013), occurs when the learner faces difficult situations that bring him tension and anxiousness. The third type of anxiety, so called language anxiety, is the one that is connected to second language learning exposures, which can be the results of various resources (Otaha, 2005; Skehan, 1989; Young, 1991).

Regarding the direct relation of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) to academic achievement, many studies have scrutinized the direct connection between academic achievement and language anxiety (Botes et al., 2020). Horwitz (2001) and MacIntyre (1995a, 1995b) defended the FLCA, saying that FLCA is an independent construct, distinct from aptitude, that can affect the language learning performance of the learners. In contrast, some studies (Sparks & Ganchow, 1995, 2007; Sparks et al., 2009) questioned the FLCA as an independent construct in language learning and claimed anxiety is just a natural result of learning difficulties or deficits. Trang et al. (2013) stated that students’ anxiety in EFL classes arises from four different sources: student-related factors, instructor-related factors, external ones, and finally, the English language complications. Daintes et al. (1993) claim that any anxiety is a handicap especially in over- competitive and hostile situations. That is why we need to look at language anxiety not only as the result of how the learner perceives him/herself and his/her learning environment but also, and more importantly, of what actually “goes on ... between the people in the classroom” (Stevick 1980:4).

The social apprehension which is the result of unfavourable attitudes can be strengthened by how the teacher and peer students actually react, both verbally and non-verbally, to the efforts an individual makes to learn, assimilate knowledge and perform. Davies and Rinvoluceri (1990) encourage looking at the problem of anxiety from the perspective of classroom interaction. They define three inhibition-breeding aspects of the language classroom: being judged, being isolated and feeling out of control.

It is classroom dynamics that can help them to attain a clear sense of direction and to provide a solid basis for ensuring learner autonomy (Turula, 2002). Language Anxiety and Classroom Dynamics examine the interdependence between the feeling of tension and

apprehension associated with language learning seen at the background of what happens in the language classroom. The research, which was carried out to determine their mutual relations, concentrated on the adult beginner. The age was important because it seems that adults more than other age groups suffer from classroom-related tensions.

In view of the client-centered approach of Rogers (1951), we learn only with the help of others - we need somebody to remove the shutters and blinkers off our eyes. As Malamah-Thomas (Castillo 1998) states “Learning a language, like the learning of anything else, is essentially an individual achievement ... But typically, this private process takes place in the public context of the classroom, the individual is one of a group”. The already-quoted analysis of adult learner diaries (Coare and Thomson 1996) proves that mature students emphasise the positive effect of group work seeing it as inspiring and enjoyable. However, it is the kind of learning environment in the group that is important because certain study contexts are more efficient than others.

Stevens, Madden, Slavin and Farnish (Nunan 1993: 146) arrived at similar conclusions proving that students learning in co-operative groups outperformed those from competitive learning environments. This was most probably possible because collaborative classroom is conducive to learning in four ways: they lower the affective filter; they promote interaction; they enable strategy exchange; and they encourage the individual to conform – give up his/her objectives for the sake of the group’s overall aims – which makes it possible for the whole group to achieve the overall goal of the course. In this way, the collaborative classroom - where “there is a positive supportive atmosphere”; “members have positive self-image which is reinforced by the group, so they feel secure enough to express their individuality”; “the group is tolerant of all its members”; “members feel secure and accepted”; “the members of the group trust each other”; “individuals in the group are not competitive and do not seek individual attention at the expense of others”; “the group has a sense of fun” (Hadfield 1992:12) – will be synonymous with Krashen’s friendly learning environment.

Thus, by being a low-anxiety learning environment, the collaborative classroom fosters genuine interaction more than any other educational context, because if students trust one another, they are not afraid to express their opinions and feelings. Communication, in turn, develops and reinforces such skills as listening to others, talking with others and negotiating meaning in a shared context. Rivers (1988) states that through such meaningful interaction students increase their language store by learning from their peers, utilise all the language they know in real-life - or at least quasi- real-life – exchanges where expressing the actual meaning is important.

## **The Role of the Teacher**

The above-listed advantages, promoting collaboration in the language classroom seems indispensable. For a number of reasons, the process, at least initially, is in the hands of the teacher. Heterogeneous as it is, a group of adults as any other group of novices in a given environment is ready to accept and comply with the rules suggested by the person in charge of the formative process and this person is inevitably the teacher. The students very often mirror the teacher's behaviour and attitudes giving back as much as they get. That is why it is the teacher's duty to set the initial mood of the group and class experience.

Therefore, if the teacher wants to create a collaborative classroom, (s)he will, first of all, need to take the initiative in sharing him/herself – his/her feelings and thoughts - with the students (Rogers 1969, Dörnyei and Malderez 1999) on the one hand and enhance peer affiliation on the other. If the collaborative classroom is to be based on the interaction of adults, the only teacher-learner symbiosis conducive to such a transactional model will be the adult-adult one. This implies that the teacher must not dominate the group and facilitation should be prior to management. It also means allowing room for learner autonomy. It is true that the positive affective factors of the collaborative classroom improve the learners' morale and thus, by increasing his/her self-esteem and motivation, encourage autonomy. It has to be emphasised that autonomy is a result of conscious effort on the part of the learner and, more often, the teacher.

With regard to the significance of classroom dynamics on learner anxiety to a collaborative and autonomous environment in EFL context, there were a few empirical researches in the literature on classroom dynamics. So, the present study aims to answer the following questions:

1. Is there any relation between EFL Learners' anxiety with the principles of Classroom dynamics (CLD)?
2. How does classroom dynamics create learner autonomy in a collaborative learning environment?
3. To what extent principles of classroom dynamics works in English as Foreign Language (EFL) context?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

A total of 240 EFL learners having same educational background (level-1 semester-1 students at Bangladesh Agricultural University, Mymensingh) took part in the study. They range in age from 20 to 22. The participants were selected on the basis of convenient

sampling method. This study is limited because it relies on the narratives of a small sample of selected learners. Yet the goal of the study is to develop hypotheses about the most important factors contributing to successful anxiety free collaborative learning for EFL learners.

### Instruments

In order to measure learners' autonomy to classroom dynamics, a questionnaire, was employed. It includes factors: classroom atmosphere, learner anxiety and EFL learning enthusiasm. Each item is followed by a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The reliability of the questionnaire, computed by Cronbach alpha, was reported to be 0.78.

### Procedure

In order to determine the relationship between the learners' autonomy to classroom dynamics and their level of anxiety, the two instruments were simultaneously administered to the participants of the study. Then they filled out them and returned them to the researcher. Scores from each of the instruments were computed and entered into SPSS version 20.

### Data Analysis

First, addressing the research question one-sample T-test run on the mean score of the autonomy to classroom dynamics principles. Based on the classroom dynamics questionnaire, the maximum score that can be obtained and implies the highest degree of autonomy to the proponents of classroom dynamics equals 120, 61 as a lowest degree of autonomy and 102 is middle score. So, 102 is considered as critical value.

**Table 1.** One-sample T-test results for the mean score of the autonomy to classroom dynamics principles

Classroom dynamics conformity	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean	t	Df	Sig
	240	82.32	17.32	1.71	2.14	80	0.010

As it can be seen, there is a significantly level of autonomy to the principles of classroom dynamics among the learners ( $t= 2.14, p<0.05$ ).

Next, normality of the distributions was examined using Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Then, a correlation design using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was manipulated to answer the research question of the study.

Regarding to the research question, first the normality of distribution for the scores was investigated. To check the normality assumption, one sample Kolmogorov- Smirnov (K-S) test was conducted on classroom dynamics, learner anxiety and learners autonomy to collaborative learning scores. In one- sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test, if the significance level is larger than .05, it shows that the data are normally distributed. As it clears in Table 1 the results of one- sample K-S test revealed that the data was normally distributed.

**Table 2.** One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

		Classroom Dynamics (CD)	Learner Anxiety (LA)	Collaboration, and Learner Autonomy (CLAu)
N		240	240	240
Normal Parameters	Mean	85.51	65.61	67.68
	Std. Deviation	22.47	21.37	21.15
Differences	Absolute	.050	.051	.052
	positive	.060	.084	.086
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		1.224	1.336	1.234
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.071	.165	.175

To examine the effect of Classroom Dynamics on Learner Anxiety along with Collaborative and autonomous learning, Pearson product– moment correlation was conducted. The results (Table 2) revealed significant correlations among CLD, LA and CLAu ( $r=0.85$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

**Table 3.** Correlation between Classroom Dynamics and Learner Anxiety

Classroom Dynamics (CLD)			Learner Anxiety
Classroom Dynamics (CLD)	Pearson Correlation	1	0.85**
Learner Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	0.85**	1

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 4.** Cronbach  $\alpha$  Coefficient of the scale.

Foreign Language Anxiety	$\alpha$ value
	.897

The reliability coefficients of the scale and sub-dimensions used in the research were calculated. It was concluded that the  $\alpha$  coefficients of the validity of the scale were over .70.

## DISCUSSION

The present study probed EFL learners' autonomy to the principles of classroom dynamics and its effects on learners' anxiety in the EFL context. The results indicated that EFL learners achieved high level of autonomy with the principles of classroom dynamics (CLD).

Accordingly, the role of the learners in CLD is central. They need to be autonomous, creative, and reflective. Addressing the research questions, the results indicated significant relationship between learners' anxiety and learners' autonomy to principles of CLD. It implied that more commitment to principles of CLD lead to decrease the level of anxiety to a collaborative learning environment. It also helps learners to develop their learning in an autonomous way through developing collaborative environment, what they do and to practice what they theorized, because they know their needs, interests, backgrounds and classroom environment.

## CONCLUSION

This study intended to examine the relationship of classroom dynamics and EFL learners' anxiety in terms of developing collaborative EFL communication and a sense of learner autonomy in the EFL context. The results showed that there was a significant relationship between variables, implies that more classroom dynamics in the classroom, the less level of learners' anxiety would be. Further, it was found that the level of reflection of classroom dynamics in the EFL classes was high. In addition, a unifying theme of this study is that successful collaborative learning takes significant planning and preparation as well as on- going monitoring and refinement. The learners who participated in this study valued collaborative learning for its potential to boost EFL learning at academic engagement in the classroom, and for the gains in content and language proficiency have been observed.

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