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An Investigation into the Causes of English Language Learning Anxiety in Students at AWKUM

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Abstract

It has been generally acknowledged that many an individual faces intrapersonal difficulties in learning a second/foreign language. Anxiety is one of them. The purpose of the present study is to investigate the factors that cause language anxiety among English Department students at Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan (AWKUM), Pakistan and to devise strategies for reducing the effect of language anxiety.

The researchers carried out the study by administering FLCAS (Horwitz et al. 1986) to 62 AWKUM students, and by conducting semi-structured interviews with 10 volunteer students.

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The findings from FLCAS and semi-structured interviews showed that the students felt anxious of making mistakes and about teachers' correcting their mistakes in the classes; they felt nervousness about failing the exams; and, moreover, it was also found that the students' poor socio-economic backgrounds developed a sense of marginalization among them vis-a-vis foreign language use. Again, the poor return rate of the FLCAS also shows the students' feeling anxiety regarding foreign language.

The study recommended that language teachers should adopt purely learners-centred teaching methods. A low- anxiety and supportive learning environment should be created inside the classrooms.

Keywords: English Language Learning Anxiety; FLCAS; AWKUM

1. Introduction

With the emergence of English as a global language, its importance and usage has also got manifold. Almost every second prospective international student, who wants to engage himself in further studies, has to learn and attain a certain level of English proficiency. However, many a learner expresses their inability and sometimes they even acknowledge their failure in learning English as a second/foreign language. These learners may be good at learning any other skill but, when it comes to the skill of learning another language, they claim to have a '*mental block*' against it (Horwitz et al., 1986:125).

In many cases, students' feeling of stress, anxiety or nervousness may impede their language learning and performance abilities. Many a researcher believes that anxiety is the major hurdle to be overcome while learning English or any other foreign language. Anxiety experienced in learning English language can be debilitating and may influence students' achievements of their goals.

The present study was carried out for probing into the causes of English language learning anxiety at the department of English in Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan (AWKUM) Pakistan. Hopefully, it would benefit the students as well as teachers at AWKUM and across Pakistan, helping them in reducing the effects of language anxiety.

2. The Aim of the study

The main purpose of our study was to know about some of the factors that may cause English language learning anxiety among students in AWKUM. Previous research studies have shown that language anxiety is caused due to some psychological, social, and cultural factors. The fact

that language anxiety is a psychological construct, it most likely stems from the learner's own 'self', i.e., as an intrinsic motivator (Schwartz, 1972; cited in Scovel 1991: 16).

Again, language anxiety may be a result as well as a cause of insufficient command of the target language (Sparks and Ganschow; cited in Horwitz, 2001). That is to say it may be experienced due to linguistic difficulties that learners may face in learning and using the target language. Within social contexts, language anxiety may be experienced due to extrinsic motivators (Schwartz, 1972; cited in Scovel, 1991: 16).

Also, the target language is a representation of another cultural community; there is a predisposition among some people to experience such anxiety because of their own concerns about ethnicity, foreignness, and the like (Gardner cited in Horwitz & Young, 1991). Social status of the speaker and the interlocutor, a sense of power relations between them, and gender could also be important factors in causing language anxiety for speakers. Besides, there could be some other factors behind language anxiety of the learners.

These may be related to teaching methods and learning environments especially in poor settings such as ours (i.e. Pakistan's). A further detailed investigation about these factors could potentially assist language teachers to alleviate anxiety in the classroom setting and to make the classroom environment less anxiety-provoking and hence to improve learners' performance in the target language.

3. Review of the Related Literature

In order to make understand the concept of language anxiety, Hilgard, Atkinson, & Atkinson, (1971) as cited in Scovel, 1991: 18) define it to be '*a psychological construct, commonly described by psychologists as a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object.* Anxiety has been found to interfere with many types of learning but when it is associated with leaning a second or foreign language, it is termed as '*second/foreign language anxiety*'. It is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Similarly, the term Anxiety, '*as perceived intuitively by many language learners, negatively influences language learning and has been found to be one of the most highly examined variables in all of psychology and education*' (Horwitz, 2001: 113).

Psychologists make a distinction between three categories of anxiety: trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety is relatively stable personality characteristic, '*a more permanent predisposition to be anxious*' (Scovel, 1978: cited in Ellis, 1994: 479); whereas state anxiety is a transient anxiety, a response to a particular anxiety-provoking stimulus such as an important test (Spielberger, 1983: cited in Horwitz, 2001: 113). The third category, Situation-specific anxiety, refers to the persistent and multi-faceted

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nature of some anxieties (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a: cited in Horwitz, 2001: 113). It is aroused by a specific type of situation or event such as public speaking, examinations, or class participation (Ellis, 1994: 480).

Some researchers reported a negative relationship between language anxiety and achievement, e.g. the higher the anxiety, the lower the performance, (Clement, Gardner, & Smythe, 1977, 1980: cited in Onwuegbuzie, A, J., Bailey, P., & Daley, C, E. 1999: 218). Recently, Horwitz (2001: 121) has reiterated that the issue of understanding the relationship between anxiety and achievement is unresolved. The reason for these mixed results is perhaps, as stated by Philip (cited in Shams, 2006: 8), that ‘comparison of the experimental research examining the relationship between anxiety and second language learning is, to a degree, perplexing, presenting some conflicting evidence and illustrating that anxiety is a complex, multi-faceted construct.’

In addition to the negative effects of anxiety on language learning and performance, anxiety has occasionally been found to facilitate language learning. Anxiety, in its debilitating and facilitating forms, serves simultaneously to motivate and to warn the learner. Facilitating anxiety ‘motivates the learner to *‘fight’* the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approach behaviour’ (Scovel 1991: 2). Debilitating anxiety, in contrast, ‘motivates the learner to *‘flee’* the new learning task; it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behaviour’ (1991: 22).

Most of the researches on language anxiety have revealed the fact that anxiety can impede foreign language achievement and its production. According to Campbell & Ortiz (1991), almost one half of all language students experience a startling level of anxiety. Language anxiety is experienced by learners of both foreign and second language and poses potential problems ‘because it can interfere with the acquisition, retention and production of the new language’ (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991: 86). Again since 1970s, there has been a great deal of research on second/foreign language anxiety. But the researchers are unable to draw a clear picture of how anxiety affects language learning and performance.

The present study tried to probe into the factors that may cause English language learning anxiety among students in AWKUM.

4. Research Methodology

The researchers, in order to conduct the study, incorporated two sources of data collection. First, data were collected through a questionnaire ‘Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale’ (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al (1986), slightly modified by excluding some of its statements. The five point Likert scale was used and each statement had five responses. The sample of 62 was equally divided among male-female students of AWKUM. Second, data were

collected from 10 volunteer students through semi- structured interviews. Basically, the research study was qualitative and descriptive in nature.

5. Findings from FLCAS Questionnaire

After analysing the data through SPSS Version 17, the researchers drew certain results. In order to mould the present study as per the required format, the researchers, instead of giving a full-scale data analysis, documented the findings in itemised way. Following were some of the main findings got through administering FLCAS questionnaire:

- i. Majority of the students feel anxious about making mistakes in a language class.
- ii. Majority of the students get trembled at knowing that they are going to be called on in language class.
- iii. Majority of the students bother about taking more language classes. This may show that they usually have got little exposure to the targeted language.
- iv. Majority of the students suffer from lack of attention and interest in the class.
- v. Majority of the students think that other students might be better than them especially in a language class. There may be some sort of language inferiority complex in the students.
- vi. Majority of the students usually do not feel comfortable during tests in language class. This may show a sign of language anxiety on their part. It may be due to fear of failure.
- vii. Majority of the students feel worry about the consequences of failing language class.
- viii. Majority of the respondents get nervous during language class.
- ix. Majority of the students feel embarrassment in volunteering answer in a language class.
- x. The students get nervous due to the teachers' being too ready for correcting their mistakes.
- xi. Majority of the students despite being well prepared for language class usually feel anxious.
- xii. A large number of students do not like to attend language classes.
- xiii. Majority of the students feel afraid of teachers correcting their mistakes.
- xiv. Majority of the students feel fearful at knowing that they may be asked to perform an activity in the English class.
- xv. Majority of the students are of the view that they get confused and nervous by more study.
- xvi. Majority of the students feel pressure due to their having to prepare very well for language class.
- xvii. Majority of the students feel worry about getting left behind in a language class.
- xviii. Majority of the students feel more and more nervous in language class than in any other class.
- xix. Some of the students are not sure and relaxed when they go to a language class which shows their language anxiety.

- xx. Majority of the students get nervous when they do not understand every word that the language teacher utters in a language class.

6. Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews

Findings from semi-structured interviews with 10 volunteer students to a great extent complimented the results got through administration of FLCAS questionnaire. Following are some of the main findings:

- i. The students' poor educational backgrounds (schooling) usually lets them suffer from language anxiety as English as a Foreign Language has ever been made an incomprehensible subject to them by their teachers. One of the students puts in, "Well! I have never liked my English Teacher at School... He would always teach us translation of the lesson... He would ask us to memorise the grammar rules...(Mujhey apna school English ka English teacher acha nahe lagta tha... woh hamain har waqt lessons ki translation karwata tha... woh hamain grammar k rules zabai yaad karwata...)"
- ii. Their poor socio-economic backgrounds generally make them feel as if English language is the language of the elite only and they can hardly feel at home about learning it effectively and sans any complex. Again, one of the students says, "I think only rich can learn English language effectively... (Meray khayal mei sirf ameer hi angrezi zaban achaey tareeqay se seekh saktey hain...)"
- iii. Their teachers' strict way of teaching, examination fear and their intrapersonal biases towards English and fore-mostly their interpersonal communication problems (especially between male and female students) also make the AWKUM students' anxious to a great extent.

8. Discussion and Conclusions

Mostly the negative responses indicate the students' English language learning anxiety. It can be arguably accepted that most of the AWKUM students get nervous whenever they feel the need to use English in- and outside the classroom. We can deduce from the above findings that strict and formal classroom environment may be one of the reasons for students' anxiety.

From the findings of the study, we can also feel that perhaps there is lack of understanding and good working relations between AWKUM students and their teachers. It was found that the fear of making mistakes and apprehension about others may raise the anxiety level of the students. The fear of failure in examination also proves one of causes of the students' language anxiety. Again, the students get nervous when they do not understand what the teacher is trying to correct. Limited exposure to the targeted language can increase the students' anxiety level. Most

importantly, the students' socio-economic background may also influence their efforts of learning the targeted language. The educational background of the students may also influence their language learning.

The results of this study clearly indicates that in spite the use of modern communicative approaches and techniques, the problem of English language anxiety still persists among the students of AWKUM. It still needs to be researched in more detailed way. The students' lack of confidence, their inability to participate in the classroom discussions, their over self-consciousness, consciousness of the grammatical forms and structure, low self esteem, speaking apprehension, their nervousness and a feeling of getting behind are, however, also some of the primary factors that do contribute towards language anxiety.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations can be made in order to facilitate the learners as well as the teachers:

- i. English language teachers across the country should acknowledge the importance of the issue of language anxiety among the students.
- ii. Friendly, informal and learning supportive environment should be created in language classrooms.
- iii. Teachers should try to encourage the students whenever they make mistakes in language classrooms.
- iv. Students' interested areas should be discussed in language classrooms.
- v. The teachers should use gentle or non-threatening methods of error correction and should always be ready to offer a few words of encouragement.
- vi. Students' familiarity with culture and ethnic background can also be helpful in reducing their anxiety.
- vii. Students' centred teaching methods should be adopted in language classrooms.
- viii. Special teacher training courses or sessions about how to reduce language anxiety should be arranged for the English language teachers in general and AWKUM English language teachers in particular.
- ix. Foreign language anxiety awareness should be created in the students so that they become mentally ready to cope it individually.
- x. The student should be encouraged to practice English language inside and outside the classroom.

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