

English language Learning Anxiety Among Foreign Language learners in Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Soran University as an Example.

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Abstract: This study aims at investigating foreign language anxiety among Kurdish and Psychology department students at faculty of Arts/ Soran University. This quantitative study was measured by foreign language anxiety classroom (FLCAS) of Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Psychology department participants were 37 students and Kurdish department participants were 33 students. The results indicated that all the students reported high level of anxiety, but the two groups are at different levels of that anxiety. The participants in the Psychology department reported a higher level of anxiety as compared to Kurdish participants which is lower. Considering the results toward gender differences in language anxiety; girls are more anxious than boys especially the younger ones. Considering the importance of language anxiety in the process of language learning, some recommendations are presented for further studies.

Keywords: Language learning, Second language Anxiety, Affective filter

Introduction

Today, there is widespread agreement that the English language is the new world “lingua franca” or world language. As a result, there has been an explosion of English language teaching or English as Second Language (ESL) pedagogy. Moreover, the demand for international students to acquire good English language communication skills is now imperative in almost every branch of education. Among ESL educators it is widely understood that the demands placed on international students to become proficient in the English language can cause students to experience heightened levels of stress, nervousness, and anxiety. This anxiety may interfere with students learning abilities and their acquisition of the English language. Anxiety, in general, can be defined as problems which are caused by many psychological factors such as fear, stress, threats, dangers, and unexpected psychological causes.

In the field of ESL many scholars have studied the effects of stress or anxiety on students learning a second language, particularly the English language. This phenomenon is often referred to in academia as Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). Many studies show that FLA is a major factor experienced by English language learners around the world. It is also one the biggest impediments in the process of successful English language learning. Macintyre & Gardner (1993, p. 284) define language anxiety as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language context speaking, listening, and learning”. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986, p. 127) state that foreign language anxiety is “a distinct complex of self-perception, feelings and behaviors related to classroom learning language process”. They have shown that even good learners of English often experience “mental block” and increased anxiety when they have to talk in front of class mates.

In Iraqi Kurdistan the acquisition of the English language is now considered an essential part of the educational system. English is being taught in all of the schools and universities. Many academic courses are now taught completely in the English language. However, many people ignore the effect of anxiety on ESL learners which might easily cause failure and students to drop out of higher education programs. This FLA anxiety will be a major barrier to enhancing English language learning and communication skills and the educational systems goal of improving ESL proficiency among its students. Students with high levels of anxiety in English language learning will have more challenges to overcome. Therefore, it is very important for the educational system to consider such matters and inform all ESL instructors about the FLA factor. Ignoring issues related to FLA will have a negative impact on guaranteeing a successful ESL program.

Statement of the problem

This research aims to answer the following questions:

- 1- Do Kurdish Students learning English in Soran University experience language anxiety?
- 2- Are there any differences between English learning anxiety among boys and girls?
- 3- Are there any differences between English learning anxiety among psychology and Kurdish department?

Literature review

Foreign language anxiety has attracted worldwide attention of many researchers in the field of Second Language Learning. It has been nearly forty years since the first publications of Stephan Krashen's ground breaking research into how second languages are learned. Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada (2006) in their linguistic book state that "Krashen's ideas were very influential during a period when second language teaching was in transition from approaches that emphasized learning rules or memorizing dialogues to approaches that emphasized using language with a focus on meaning" (p.38).

Most of the studies on language anxiety reveal that anxiety is the questionable matter toward learning English as a second/foreign language, it influences the students' productive and performance. (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p.86) indicate that Language anxiety is experienced by learners of language which leads to difficulties "because it can interfere with the acquisition, retention and production of the new language"

Furthermore (Lightbown & Spada, 2006), they widely credit Krashen's influences on developments within "communicative language teaching, including immersion and content-based instruction". Krashen writes, (p. 38) "We will use the term 'learning' henceforth to refer to conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them" (Krashen, 1982, p.10).

Krashen highlights that *affective filter* hypothesis is the most challengeable hypothesis in which learners fail to learn a language due to some psychological and environmental factors. Lightbown & Spada, (2006), explain that Krashen's '*affective filter*' is a "metaphorical barrier that prevents learners from acquiring language even when appropriate input is available" (p. 37). More specifically, the states of feelings, motives, needs, attitudes, and emotional may basically be responsible. A learner/student who is angry, upset, tense, anxious, frightened, bored, frustrated, or otherwise preoccupied may '*affectively*' filter-out input, making it nearly impossible for language acquisition. Moreover, (Krashen, 1982, p. 31) shows that the concept of the *Affective Filter* was first proposed by Dulay and Burt in 1977 and their work was "consistent with the theoretical work done in the area of affective variables and second language acquisition.

To Dornyei's (2005), understanding "There is little doubt that anxiety affects second language performance. Indeed, most scholars would agree with Arnold and Brown's conclusion that 'Anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process'" (p.198). In fact, Dornyei quotes from the seminal work of Horwitz et al. in 1986 that actually claims that all foreign language learners' suffer, with varying degrees of severity, a type of *anxiety* uniquely caused because of second language experiences.

According to Horwitz and his colleagues, foreign language anxiety stems from the inherent deficit of second language learners and can be identified using a 33-item, 5-point Likert-scale they developed called the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS).

Stevick thinks that “Classrooms that encourage low filters are those that promote low anxiety among students that keep students off the defensive.” (Stevick, 1976 as cited in Krashen, 1982). Krashen observes, “The effective language teacher is someone who can provide input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety manner. Of course,” he adds rather facetiously “many teachers have felt this way about their task for years, at least until they were told by the experts otherwise” (Krashen, 1982, p. 32). If recognized and taken seriously by L2 educators and program administrators, Krashen’s ‘*affective filter*’ idea raises serious questions and problems for institutions and teachers engaged in both second language pedagogy and their implementation. Short of acknowledging that these issues might be a factor in some students poor or below average performance, many critics argue that few “mainstream” second language programs have seriously developed an institutional or programmatic framework for limiting the negative consequences these multiplicity of issues pose.

Historically, Krashen is by no means the first or the last researcher to recognize these environmental impediments to successful learning, particularly language learning. Some radical thinkers like Donald N. Larsen writing in his *Guidelines for Barefoot Language Learning* in 1984 suggest a near complete rejection of contemporary teaching structure and pedagogy, because it is by default at the root of most student failure (Larsen, 1984). He says that not only must the successful language learner possess a positive internal force, but also be able to control the internal negative forces that keep one dependent on teachers and study. Likewise, over a decade earlier Paulo Freire in his revolutionary *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* saw the system as dehumanizing, exploitative, oppressive and violent and called for even more extreme measures by students and teachers to resist its hegemonic power. For Freire and his colleagues the educational system sees students as mere empty “receptacles” or “containers” to be “filled” by the teacher with information passing as knowledge. “The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are” (Freire. 2000, p. 72).

Pappamihel, N (2001) entitled (Moving From the ESL Classroom into the Mainstream: An Investigation of English Language Anxiety in Mexican Girls) surveyed (178) students (91) boys and (87) middle-school Mexican immigrant students attending school in the U.S. Participants were given the English Language Anxiety Scale, she found that all the students faced a high level of anxiety, and also she found that girls reported a high level of anxiety than boys. Moreover, Tóth (2008), used the same Horwitz, (1986) *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS). The participants of his research were 117 English majors and 66 non English majors; he found that Non English majors who study English faced more anxiety than English majors. Finally, Lucas, R. I., Miraflores, E., & Go, D. (2011) in their research entitled English language learning anxiety among foreign language learners in the Philippines was administered to 250 foreign college students. The findings of this research discovered that the foreign students who participated in this study are experiencing language anxiety in learning English in the host country.

Methodology

Research design

The current study uses quantitative descriptive methods. It seeks to determine the causes that might contribute to the anxiety of foreign language learning of English. One survey questionnaires, the researchers use Hortwitz et all's (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to 70 students in Soran University Faculty of Arts both in the Psychology and Kurdish departments.

Settings

This research was conducted in May 2014. All students who participate in this research were volunteers. The researcher chose non-random purposive sampling because the individuals needed special qualifications as they were required to be first year's students and enrolled in Soran university/ Faculty of Arts in Psychology and Kurdish departments and taking 8 hours of English classes for 5 months in Soran University Faculty of Arts. The teacher in the Department of Kurdish was a Kurdish native speaker with English as their SL-second language. The teacher in the Department of Psychology was a native English speaker who did not speak any Kurdish. The same book was used by both teachers, the book was (Headway plus: Elementary Students Book by (Liz and John Soars). All the students have studied at least 7 years of English in elementary and high school before coming to the University.

Instruments

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by Horwitz et al, (1986) was used to obtain data for this research. They made a unique contribution to the identification of the scope of foreign language anxiety by developing the 33- Likert-Scale-Item. This questionnaire is categorized by the cause of anxiety that may be prevalent among foreign language learners of English. The Factors are identified as:

Caused of language anxiety	Questionnaire number
Communication Anxiety	1,9,14,18,24,27,29,32
Fear of Native Evaluation	3,7,13,15,20,23,25,31,33
Test Anxiety	2,8,10,19,21
English classroom Anxiety	4,5,6,11,12,16,17,22,26,28,30

The participants of this study were asked to rate each of the statements in the FLCAS using the 5- points interval of positive and negative statements, for positive statements 5 refers to strongly agree, 4- agree, 3- neutral, 2- disagree, and 1- strongly disagree. Also for negative statements 1 refers to strongly agree, 2-agree, 3 neutral, 4- disagree, 5 strongly disagree.

Method of Analysis

The researchers used Statistic package for the social sciences (SPSS) version 21. Descriptive statistical analysis used to analyzing the data.

Results

The results of the descriptive analysis indicated that 70 students in Soren University Faculty of Arts taking English class in Psychology and Kurdish departments, generally had a feeling of anxiety in learning English language ($M=133.14$, $M_0=132$).

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of the Language Anxiety Experienced by Students on Both Departments

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Anxiety	70	133.14	19.22	2.29738

As seen in table 2, one of the variables of language learning anxiety in Kurdish and Psychology departments. Psychology department participants were 37 students ($M=144.89$, $SD=14$) and Kurdish department participants were 33 students ($M=119.96$, $SD=15.4$). Departments explained a significant proportion of variance in language learning anxiety, $R^2=.42$.

Table 2

Significant Proportion of Variance in Language Learning Anxiety

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square
Department	.652 ^a	.425	.417

Furthermore, the mean and standard deviation for English language anxiety among gender. Participants were 38 female and 32 males (female: $M=142.18$, $SD=17.39$; male: $M=122.4$, $SD=15.56$). Genders explained a significant proportion of variance in language learning anxiety, $R^2=.26$.

Table 3

Genders Significant Proportion of Variance in Language Learning Anxiety

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square
Gender	.516 ^a	.267	.256

Further studies reveals the English language anxiety among ages Table 4. Participants between ages (18-19) 34 and (21-above) 36 ((18-20): $M=138.94$, $SD=18.41$; (21-above): $M=127.66$, $SD=18.57$). Ages explained a significant proportion of variance in language learning anxiety, $R^2=.087$.

Discussion

As we have discussed, past research suggests that anxiety has a great effect on second language acquisition and may be part of the difficulty that learners have in acquiring another language (Lee, 2009& Pappamihel, 2002). For researchers such as Chen and Chang there is a direct correlation between levels of foreign language anxiety and language learning difficulties experienced in the

language learning process. (Chen&chang, 2004). The results of the present study show that there is a direct correlation between language learning difficulties in both departments and anxiety experienced in the Psychology program and Kurdish language programs at Soran University/Faculty of Arts.

First of all, it is important to note that this is the first study of its kind in Iraqi Kurdistan to use the important Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by Horwitz et al, (1986).

The aim of this research was to attempt to answer four questions. Moreover, results of this study suggest that English language anxiety is multidimensional, affecting ESL students differently depending on the context of the situations. The first aim is to know if students experience language anxiety in their English classes. The results show that all the students in both departments are experiencing a high level of anxiety which is more than the population mean in this research. The finding of this study is supported by other studies like (MacIntyre& Gardner, 1991, p.86) indicate that Language anxiety experienced by learners of language may lead to difficulties “because it can interfere with the acquisition, retention and production of the new language”.

The second aim for this research was to know the differences of language anxiety between male and female students. The results show that females experience more anxiety than males in the present Kurdish educational system at Soran University. This initial finding will require further investigation and comparison with other data from around the world before a clear explanation of the results can be offered. However, initial findings may be the result of cultural differences within Kurdish society and the traditional roles of males and females. According to some observers woman experience more traditional social pressures than men in the areas of higher education in Kurdish society. Future research should be conducted to ascertain these pressures and the role they play in the increased levels of anxiety discovered in the FLCAS survey. Furthermore, Pappamihel N. (2001). The findings indicated that all the students in this study faced a high level of anxiety, and also found that girls reported a higher level of anxiety as compared to boys.

Furthermore, the results from another research question clearly indicate the differences between anxiety experienced by students in the Kurdish and Psychology departments. The results show that students in the Psychology department experience more language learning anxiety than students in the Kurdish department. One possible explanation for this result might be because the teacher in the Kurdish department is a native Kurdish speaking teacher who teaches English. Perhaps, when students do not understand something in the class the teacher might translate words into Kurdish for students to help them understand the lesson. Also, the pronunciation of the words might be another factor, speed of speaking, and cultural similarities in teaching style. Moreover, the teacher in the Psychology department is a native English speaker and does not speak any Kurdish. This might have happened because of cultural differences, speed of speaking, accent difficulties. Another factor could be the teacher did not speak Kurdish; yet, the students learned some English anyway. Krashen observes, “The effective language teacher is someone who can provide input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety manner. Of course,” he adds rather facetiously “many teachers have felt this way about their task for years, at least until they were told by the experts otherwise” (Krashen, 1982, p. 32). This might explain why students in this class experience less stress/anxiety than in the class where the teacher is a native English speaker. Moreover, the Kurdish

instructor/teacher may be more aware of ESL learning difficulties and more “culturally” sensitive to the struggles of the Kurdish students in their effort to learn English. However, these explanations are mere speculation at this point, but they do raise some interesting questions which will require further investigation and analysis. For example; are native Kurdish speakers more comfortable with English teachers who are native Kurdish speakers?

Recommendations

One of the recommendations on helping the student with anxiety in the ESL classroom is Wichadee, S. (2010), in his study entitled, *Cooperative Learning Approach: A Successful Way of Reducing Learning Anxiety in an EFL Class*. His study was conducted at Bangkok University in Thailand with the ESL classrooms among their university students learning English. He found that in the cooperative learning environment, students were much less stressed and had obvious reduced anxiety levels in the classroom. As our study was done in Kurdistan, this study in Thailand, but both cultures possess a sense of community, unlike the western cultures. According to Worde (2003), when students feel alone with no friends, they are “more self-conscious.” Changing the teaching strategy to using one on one interaction or group work helped students to interact with others. This did two things for the students’, first, it helped the students become familiar with their classmates which really helped in reducing anxiety in their lessons. Second, weak students interacted with good students to help their confidence. Usually, the weak students lose confidence in their ability as the semester progresses, unless something is done to help them to boost confidence. Working in groups is one way to solve this problem. Students tend to be shy to speak out in the class, but might be more willing to share their lessons among peers in a smaller group. Group members can complement each other’s strengths and weaknesses in their English proficiency. Just as an example, one student might be better at vocabulary while another student might be more proficient in grammar. In working together, they can help each other with their lessons.

Another example of the benefit in cooperative learning is reducing stress and anxiety in learning a second language is accomplished through groups working together in thinking, creating and discussing as a group. Along with cooperative learning, studies have found that teachers that provide a relaxing classroom environment reduces anxiety and the students gain a motivation to learn. Other studies have found that when students get to pick the things they are interested in and explore these interests in group or one on one exercises, this helps in learning motivation and increases success in second language acquisition.

English Language teachers need to consider providing students with low anxiety learning settings; also, a friendly atmosphere should be maintained in order to reduce English language anxiety. Teachers should make foreign language classrooms anxiety free zones by reducing the anxiety frustrating factors according to different levels of English language competences and the English language anxieties of their students. Even educating students learning plans to reduce foreign language anxiety will help students to reduce their English language anxieties in their classes.

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