

Investigating the Perceptions of L2 Learners on Language Learning Anxiety: A Study of Undergraduate Students at Public Sector University, Sindh Pakistan

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Abstract

English has got the position of authorized language in Pakistan, widely used in various domains. In academic studies it is mandatory to teach English up to higher education. Mansoor (2004) estimates that newly graduate have studied English for at least 9 years recently. English is used as means for instruction in professional education like medicine, engineering and law.

One of the most common issues in learning a foreign language is anxiety. Among the three affective factors (attitudes, motivation, anxiety), language anxiety is the most common issue. It is also one of the factors which influence language learning (Henter, 2013). Anxiety is defined as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (cited by Spielberger.1983). Horwitz (1986) revealed that in academic as well as social context anxiety in a foreign language is related to performance and suggested three kinds of anxiety. (1) Communication apprehension (2) Fear of negative evaluation (3) Test anxiety.

This study aims to know the perceptions of English Language Learners on Language learning Anxiety in EFL classroom. The purpose of this study is to find or reveal the type of anxiety that learners feel in English as a foreign language classroom at University level.

The participants in this research are from one engineering university (MUEJ Jamshoro) of the Sindh and the size of the sample is also little (n=140). For a clear view of this area further large scale studies in different contexts of the country are needed for having a good platform for foreign language learning.

The present study used quantitative method for data collection to get unbiased results. Participants of the study are first year students of different engineering fields of Mehran University who learn English as a foreign language. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) given by (Horwitz, 1986) has been adapted and applied for data collection. The questionnaire was bifurcated into two parts, the initial part of questionnaire was for demographic information and the second part was for knowing the perceptions of students on anxiety. The data results were evaluated after doing different tests in SPSS software. The findings of the study reveal the learners feel anxiety during EFL classrooms and communication apprehension anxiety experienced by students is at a higher level from the learner’s perspective.

This will be beneficial for learners, educators and helpful to policy makers of the education system to make good and valid policies that will improve the learning of foreign language in a better way and suitable environment. It will be a significant contribution in the research domain.

Keywords: Perceptions, English language learners, EFL classroom, Anxiety

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

This study investigates the “Perceptions of students on English language learning anxiety in the EFL classroom at MUET Jamshoro”. There are three big public sector universities in Jamshoro, among these MUET is one among the most familiar and famous engineering universities of Sindh, Pakistan. In Pakistan English is taught to students as an essential subject from primary up to the higher education system. In most of the universities general as well as professional, English is taught as a subject. In both kinds of universities like professional as well as general, the source for delivering lectures is English it is also learned as a subject. It is difficult to learn a foreign language. Students come across many problems while learning English. One of the most frequent problem they face is that they feel difficulty, tensed and become nervous when speaking with teachers or in front of students in English; they feel anxiety. While learning foreign language; English, anxiety problem is the mostly observed (Horwitz, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989).

1.1.1 Anxiety and Its Types

During the first half of the twentieth century there was not regarded any difference between anxiety and fear both terms could be used at place of one another. In 1925, Freud was also of the same opinion. Later on the definition given by Scovel (1975), is “*Anxiety is an apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly linked to an object*”. “*Anxiety is a reaction to source of stress to survive*”. (Berksun, 2003; Işık & Taner, 2006). As stated by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994b), a reaction to mental stress and fear in second language situations in particular to speaking, listening and learning is called language anxiety. Cited by (Evrin Önem, 2010).

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

Horwitz et al. (1986) revealed that in academic and social context anxiety in a foreign language is related to performance. Therefore, in performance context they have proposed three anxiety types. Communication apprehension can be defined as a fear or dread which learner feels while having communication with other people. Communication apprehension defined by (McCroskey, 1978) is, while communication that is real or to be held, the fear or apprehension experienced.

Test anxiety is a type of anxiety linked with performance suggested by (Horwitz et al. 1986). Test anxiety defined by them is “a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure”. As Sarason (1984) states that test anxiety is caused when students build negative thoughts /bad image as an effect of bad performance while test-taking situation.

As a result attention of students decrease during class and performance is lowered in foreign language classrooms.

In 1986 Horwitz et al. suggested a third type of anxiety which is fear of negative evaluation. It is defined as “an apprehension about others’ evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation of negative evaluation from others.” Fear of negative evaluation and test

anxiety are very similar but the former differs from later that it occurs in wider context from social to evaluative like using language in front of the class or job interview.

1.2 Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate the perceptions of English Language Learners on Language Learning Anxiety in EFL classroom.

1.3 Objectives

- To investigate whether the L2 learners feel anxiety in EFL classrooms.
- To explore the type of anxiety that L2 learners feel in EFL classroom.

1.4 Research Questions

- Do L2 learners feel anxiety in EFL classrooms?
- Which type of anxiety is most common among the learners in EFL classroom?

1.5 Significance of the Study

It is noticed during the course of study that there is need to conduct a study in Pakistani context on English language learning anxiety. This study would make a significant contribution in the field of research, particularly in English language learning anxiety in Sindh province; Pakistani context. The study will be valuable and beneficial for learners, educators, researchers and think tanks.

1.6 Problem Statement

After colonization the status of the English language has increased. It is used oftenly in many sectors of Pakistan. As a result, the usage of English language is greater than before in the entire spheres of life. In Pakistani society English has got high value therefore every person learns it. (Waseem & Jibeen, 2013). In education system English is the means for teaching. While learning English students feel dread, fear, nervousness when communicating with other people; they feel anxiety. The present study is to know which type of anxiety they experience at a higher level.

1.7 Motivation for the Study

In Pakistan English possesses high prestige. Every person conversing in English is respected more than the one who does not speak English. In Pakistan, each and every person wants to learn English. So while learning the language learner encounters many problems, anxiety is one of those. The research has been conducted after having special personal experience with the students from engineering universities, during studies. Though they have to face many other problems while learning, but anxiety in learning English has been observed at great extent. Thus planned to conduct a research that addresses the question of the perceptions of students about language learning anxiety in EFL classroom.

2. Literature Review

Horwitz et al. (1986) gave the foreign language anxiety definition that is most common and widely accepted; “*A distinct complex constructs of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process.*” (1986: p. 128).

2.1 Previous Research on Language Anxiety

Since 1970s, there is a focus of most of researchers on foreign language anxiety. Studies have been done to find the association between language achievement and anxiety.

These studies done in the early years were co-relational. These earlier studies showed counter results concerning to the relationship between language performance and anxiety, just like the studies of (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Scovel, (1978) attempted to explain the literature that was available on language anxiety and acquisition, to know the cause behind the contradictory results of researchers. He stated the cause behind the contradictory results is lack of suitable instrument. To overcome this problem researchers should show clearly the particular type of anxiety which they measure. (Horwitz (2001), Cited by Gopang 2015, p. 28).

Anxiety is a complex psychological construct, It is an early effort to associate it to the universal and extensive task of language acquisition.(Scovel, 1978).

Positive interrelation between foreign language proficiency and anxiety was found by some researchers like (Chastain, 1975; Kleinmann, 1977; Scovel, 1978). Kleinmann in his study divided ESL students in two group; one group consisted of local speakers of Portuguese and Spanish and another group of native speakers of Arabic. His study showed that students who felt facilitating anxiety at high level they tried to use those English structures which their peers avoided to use. Some investigators also found a negative correlation as (Chastain, 1975; Gardner, Smythe, Clement, & Glikzman, 1976; McCoy, 1979; Lucas, 1984; Foss & Reitzel, 1988). Gardner, (1976) refers to which they called “French Classroom Anxiety” which has defined the bad/weakening effects of anxiety on an oral production test of Speech Skills. Therefore, they state that the students who feel a high level of anxiety are less proficient in speech skills.

Saito (1996) found that as the instructional level of Japanese students reaches the higher level, the foreign language anxiety increases among them. He recommends that teachers of Japanese need to have knowledge about these difference in learner’s affective states and to response them so the bad effect of language class anxiety can be decreased. Sanaei (2016) conducted a research in Iran. The results of his study show that behavioral reactions were shown by all students. The students who felt more anxiety showed more anxiety symptoms and reactions whereas less anxious students showed more physiological reactions. Mari (2016) states that moderate level of anxiety occurs in particular situations during test/exam oral performance by the students of MUET. Learners can overcome the test anxiety when having good preparation for the exam. (Rastegar & Karami, 2015) conducted a research to find the correlation between Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, and Willingness to Communicate among EFL Learners in Iran.” The researcher used quantitative study as a methodology and collected the data through two questionnaires. There were 74 respondents of Shahid Bahonar University. He found an opposed/contrast results on correlation between foreign language classroom anxiety and willingness to communicate. Foreign language classroom anxiety and their academic success also showed a negative relationship. But the bond between willingness to communicate and academic success was positive. Most researchers have also worked on speaking anxiety like Chang (Tsai, 2014). Barabas (2013) in his study explores the factors that students perceive for causing anxiety.

(Suleimenova, 2012) his findings show that the more practice of speaking occurs the more

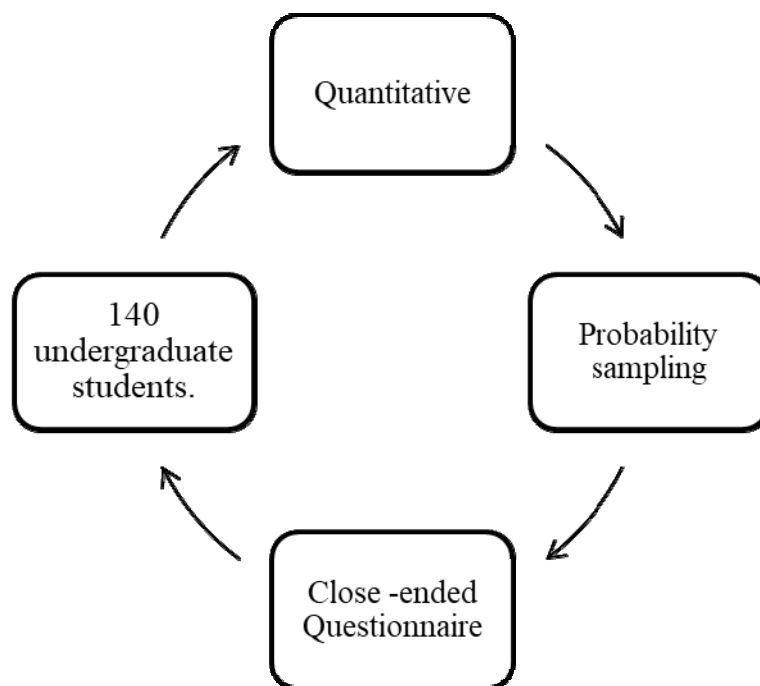
they overcome the fear. Mak (2011) reports that when learners speak in front of others they feel language anxiety, he has also explored the factors that provoke anxiety.

2.2 Research Gap

Recently, In Pakistani context most of the researchers have worked on language learning anxiety like Gopang, Mari (2016), Mina, Waseem and Jibeen, (2013), Adeel, (2011) and many others. They have made a way for new researchers to proceed and conduct research in this area in different context of Pakistan. They have explored different aspects of anxiety. Such as Gopang (2016) worked on language anxiety and learner's beliefs in language learning, but there is still need to know which type of anxiety is found more frequently among students in different contexts. Gopang (2015) conducted a study on language learning anxiety in Lasbela University Pakistan and further recommends that there is need for research to be done on this topic in the other regions of Pakistan. Thus this study aims to fill the gap in language learning anxiety research and its focus is particularly on perceptions of learners on language learning anxiety at MUET Jamshoro, Sindh.

3. Research Methodology (Paradigm, Method)

In this research quantitative methodology has been used for data collection.



3.1 Instrumentation

Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986) was employed. There are 33 items in FLCAS but only 20 items were selected in this research. The first section of research instrument was for demographic information. Second part of instrument was for knowing the perceptions of students about language learning anxiety type. The validity and reliability of this instrument was proved showing an alpha coefficient of .93, and in a test retest for a period of eight weeks $r=.83$ ($p<.001$). (Horwitz, 1986). For this study the value of chronbach alpha=.84

3.2 Participants

Informants

The participants of this study are undergraduate students of MUET Jamshoro, who learn English along with other subjects related to their engineering field. The number of participants was 140 students. Random sampling technique was adopted to be representative of whole sampling population. This study is not gender biased, all the students were offered equal chance for participation.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

The data of 140 students was analyzed through frequency and percentage ratings, in SPSS software.

5. Ethical Consideration

As Cohen states that cooperation and agreement of participants is mandatory in social research. For this study permission was taken from high authorities of MUET Jamshoro. Before data collection consent letters were filled by participants to know their willingness for involvement in the research. Informant's names are anonymous for the readers of this research. A valid and reliable tool has been used for data collection. This research is not biased on the perceptions of students. Participants were provided with sufficient time for questionnaire.

6. Results

Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the results. The descriptive statistics shows the mean and standard deviation of participant's responses so that results can be understood clearly. The same test was applied to find the answers of both questions. The first question was to know the level of anxiety in students. The Table 1 shows that level of anxiety experienced by students is at a moderate level. It means it can be overcome by applying some new strategies. The results match with the earlier studies, like (Horwitz, Campbell, & Ortiz 1991, cited in Gopang, 2016), who also found that anxiety level of students at university level.

Table 1. Language anxiety level

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Language anxiety	140	1.00	5.00	2.9571	.76272
Valid N (listwise)	140				

Table 2. Types of anxiety

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Communication apprehension	140	1.40	4.80	3.2371	.76641
Fear of negative evaluation	140	1.00	5.00	3.1014	.86115
Test anxiety	140	1.00	5.00	3.0586	.70251
Valid N (listwise)	140				

The Table 2 shows that communication apprehension occurs at high level among students showing mean=3.2371; and SD=.76641. Fear of negative evaluation at second level with mean=3.1014 and test anxiety at third level with mean=3.0586 and SD=.70251.

The findings are very much like the other studies (Koch & Terrell, 1991; Price, 1991, cited in Aydin, 2008) who found that communication apprehension as the major cause of anxiety.

7. Implications

This study has some implications for teachers and the learners. This study is beneficial for learners in the way by knowing the anxiety level of students some new and reliable strategies teachers will develop and apply them after addition in the syllabus. Consequently anxiety of students will be reduced.

8. Pedagogical Implications

Teachers are suggested to remove the gap among students and teacher; they should create a rapport, so the students feel free to share their difficulties in learning with teacher.

Teachers should also design the topic that are interested and question provoking. Give students a lot of choices and control over what they want to do so it will increase student's participation excitement for learning.

Listening and speaking skills work as a starter of language learning process. Therefore teachers have to give more attention on these skills along with giving more attention on writing and reading skills. There should be created a friendly environment that can help the teacher to lessen the anxiety of students.

Teacher should devise rule that every student deserves respect, so that students may not feel to be negatively evaluated by their classfellows or peers. In addition to teachers the study brings awareness for researchers too. It is one step forward for a deep understanding in language anxiety area.

9. Recommendations

Educators should devise the strategies for active participation of students after adding in the syllabus. The results give us an idea that respondents feel communication apprehension more than the other two types of anxiety. Therefore new techniques could be developed for having best learning environment for learners at Mehran University Jamshoro, Pakistan.

10. Conclusion

The study brings the conclusion that students at engineering University (Mehran) feel anxiety in learning English language. Research here indicates that anxiety is an influential affective factor. Teaching and learning environment requires more attention on language anxiety in Pakistani universities. This study confirms the consequences of earlier researches conducted in different contexts. These researches demonstrate that language anxiety becomes a barrier in language learning at different academic levels (Wei, 2013; Wilson, 2006; Horwitz, 2001). This study is a major help in providing a greater amount of knowledge on different thoughts of language anxiety researched and studied in learning at university level in Pakistan.

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