

Malaysian students' and instructors' perceptions of anxiety-provoking contexts in English as a second language classroom

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ABSTRACT

Many second language (L2) learners are affected by anxiety. Numerous studies have consistently demonstrated the negative effects of anxiety on student learning and performance. While many studies on language anxiety have typically involved learners as the participants or respondents in the research, not many studies focus on getting the instructors' perspective on the issue. As such, this paper investigates the language instructors' perspective on language learning anxiety in relation to their students' perspective on anxiety. Is there a match or a mismatch between the two perspectives? 21 instructors and 233 students from a Malaysian institution of higher education took part in the study. A twelve-item questionnaire was used to collect data from the participants. Statistical analysis shows that the instructors have similar perceptions on anxiety as their students.

Keywords: Anxiety, learning, teaching, second language, undergraduates

INTRODUCTION

Learning a second or foreign language is unlike learning other subjects. For one, it can disrupt an individual's self-concept and personal worldview. It also has the potential of going against a student's belief about how a second language should be learned and taught (Horwitz, 1988). For example, most students appear to have the belief that they should not speak up in the language until they can utter grammatically and structurally correct sentences. As such, being asked to speak up or to participate in an oral activity before they feel that they are ready, must have, to a certain extent, shaken their confidence and make them anxious. This type of situation-specific anxiety is labelled as 'language anxiety' by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) to differentiate it from other more general types of anxiety.

In second language anxiety research, the term 'language anxiety' is defined as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 125). Many studies on language anxiety have been carried out throughout the years. Having to speak in English in front of other people appears to be the number one cause of high level of anxiety among the students (Young, 1990; Ahmad & Awang Hashim, 2023). Studies also show that anxiety can have a negative effect on other areas of language achievement (Abu-Rabia, 2004; Aida, 1994; Brantmeier, 2005; Cheng, Horwitz, 2001; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Horwitz & Schallert, 1999; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Philips, 1992; Saito & Samimy, 1996).

Research on anxiety typically involves the participation of second language (L2) students as the respondents. Not many studies attempt to involve the instructors as the respondents. Since getting the instructors' perspective can provide a valuable input that might necessitate change at the instructional level (Allum, 2020), the involvement of instructors as respondents is deemed important. Studies on motivation (Allum, 2020), oral corrective feedback (Saeb, 2017), and effective foreign language teaching (Brown, 2009) have involved both the students and the instructors for the purpose of comparing the two perspectives.

Allum (2020), for example, reported that, while both Korean EFL students and their instructors agreed that teacher characteristic played an important role in the learning process, the two parties could not agree in terms of how it manifests (or should manifest) in the language classroom. The study on oral corrective feedback by

Saeb (2017) revealed that the students and instructors could not come to an agreement on the amount and types of corrective feedback administered; and, about the types of errors that could or should be corrected. Lastly, the study on student and instructor perceptions of effective teaching by Brown (2009) also found various discrepancies between the students' and the instructors' teaching and learning preferences. The researcher concluded that, in general, there is a need for an instructor to consult the L2 students to understand their preferences so that effective teaching and learning process could take place.

Due to the importance and the value of getting the instructors' perspective, in addition to the students' perspective, this study, therefore, aims to investigate both the L2 students' and their instructors' perceptions of anxiety-provoking contexts in the L2 classroom. Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What is the overall level of anxiety in the classroom according to the students and their instructors?
2. What is the level of anxiety experienced by the learners in various language learning contexts according to the students and their instructors?
3. Is there any similarity between the students' and their instructors' views regarding anxiety-provoking contexts in the L2 classroom?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study follows a non-experimental research design. It utilizes a quantitative survey research methodology to identify the level of anxiety experienced by the students from the perspectives of both the students and the instructors.

The study was carried out at a Malaysian institution of higher education in Perlis, Malaysia. 21 instructors voluntarily took part in the study. Four (19%) were males and 17 (81%) were females. The number of years of their teaching experience ranges from three years to thirty years (median=16). All participants understood the aim and purpose of the study.

As for the students, a total of 233 students were selected as the sample via the cluster sampling protocol. There were 96 (41.2%) males and 137 (58.8%) females. The students came from various programs and semesters. All the students were taking an English language course specific for their level of study at the university. They understood that this study was aimed at identifying their level of L2 anxiety in various L2 learning related contexts.

A twelve-item self-reporting questionnaire based on Iizuka's (2010) findings was used in the study. The questionnaire seeks to identify the level of anxiety experienced by the students in twelve different language learning contexts from the perspectives of the students and the instructors. All participants were required to read and rate each of the items based on a five-point *Likert*-like scale ranging from 1 ("Almost no anxiety/Extremely low-level anxiety") to 5 ("Very high-level anxiety").

Once the researcher received permission from the management to collect data from the participants, the survey questionnaires were then administered to the students during their respective English class. A short explanation on the purpose of the study was given to the students. They were also informed that their participation was strictly on voluntary basis. They could leave at any time that they wanted. Once the students had read and completed the questionnaires, they were returned to the researcher.

As for the lecturers, the survey questionnaires were given to them by hand, and they were given one week to complete and return the questionnaires to the researcher. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 25 was used to analyse the quantitative data. To identify the students' level of anxiety and to enable the comparison in terms of the perception of both students and instructors, the mean score (and standard deviation) was computed and reported.

FINDINGS

This study investigated matters related to language anxiety among L2 students and their instructors at a Malaysian university campus. All 254 participants (students and instructors) completed and returned the questionnaires to the researcher. Reliability analysis using SPSS version 25 software indicated that the scale was highly reliable ($\alpha = .90$).

To answer the research questions, descriptive statistics were used. The mean score (and standard deviation) for each of the twelve items (which represent the twelve language learning contexts) was calculated to determine the perceived level of L2 student anxiety in each language learning context. The following cut-offs were used to interpret the level of anxiety: 1.0-2.99 = low, 3.0-3.99 = moderate, 4.00-5.00 = high.

Table 1 below shows the L2 students' responses to all 12 anxiety scale items. The mean score and standard deviation are provided to indicate levels of anxiety across the various language learning contexts.

Table 1: Perceived level of language anxiety experienced by the students in various language learning contexts

No.	Questionnaire item	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Attending English class without enough preparation.	2.90	.91
2	Speaking English in front of everybody.	3.51	1.06
3	Listening to instructor teaching in English.	2.72	1.02
4	Listening to classmates' conversation in English.	2.54	0.97
5	Answering instructor's question in English.	3.23	.96
6	Giving opinion in English.	3.30	1.02
7	Interacting with classmates who are good in English language.	3.02	.96
8	Thinking about one's level of mastery of English language.	3.19	.98
9	Passing the English course with good result.	2.85	.91
10	Interacting in English with classmates who they are not so close with.	3.09	.99
11	Making mistakes when presenting in English.	3.41	1.02
12	Doing assignments in English.	2.91	1.03
	Overall	3.06	.69

In general, the higher the mean, the higher the level of anxiety is perceived to be. However, for the purpose of this study, the scale in Table 2 (shown below) is used to categorize the level of anxiety into three categories: High, Moderate, and Low.

Table 2: Scale for interpreting the level of anxiety

Mean	Level of anxiety
4.00 to 5.0	High
3.00 to 3.99	Moderate
1.00 to 2.99	Low

Table 3: Level of anxiety and Context

Level of anxiety	Item
High	None
Medium/Moderate	2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11
Low	1, 3, 4, 9, 12

As evident in Tables 1,2, and 3, the L2 students do experience varying level of anxiety in the L2 classroom. The students also indicated that, in general, the level of anxiety they experienced in the L2 classroom is moderate (mean = 3.00, SD = 0.71). This could be interpreted to mean that none of the language learning related activities are highly anxiety provoking. In fact, based on Table 3, more than half of the language learning contexts or activities were rated as moderate. The remaining items were rated as low anxiety provoking.

Nevertheless, in terms of the specific language learning contexts, the mean score for situations or contexts that require the students to speak in English appear to be slightly higher than most other situations or contexts. In fact, the highest mean score (mean = 3.51, SD = 1.06) is recorded for item 2 (Speaking English in front of everybody). This shows that students experience slightly higher anxiety level in such context compared to the others. This lends support to Young's (1990) findings in which speaking is perceived as the most anxiety provoking.

Why do students indicate higher level of anxiety when it comes to having to speak in English? This could be that the students are not very confident of their mastery of the language and think that their mastery of the language is still not very good (it does not matter whether it is real or merely a perception). In fact, the mean score for item 8 (Thinking about one's level of mastery of English language) seems to suggest this as it is higher compared to some other mean scores. They are also afraid of making mistakes when they speak up in English language (item 11).

Among the available language learning contexts, listening to their instructors and peers speaking in English appears to be the least anxiety provoking to the L2 students judging from the low mean score for items 3 and 4. This could be because they are able to understand what was said in English by their peers and instructors.

As for the instructors' perception of language anxiety, Table 4 below shows the instructors' perceived level of student anxiety in each language learning contexts.

Table 4: The instructors' perception of the students' level of language learning anxiety in various language learning contexts

No	Questionnaire items	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Attending English class without enough preparation.	3.19	0.81
2	Speaking English in front of everybody.	4.38	0.81
3	Listening to instructor teaching in English.	2.86	1.32
4	Listening to classmates' conversation in English.	2.24	0.89
5	Answering instructor's question in English.	4.19	0.60
6	Giving opinion in English.	4.19	0.76
7	Interacting with classmates who are good in English language.	3.52	0.68
8	Thinking about one's level of mastery of English language.	3.67	0.79
9	Passing the English course with good result.	3.48	0.87

10	Interacting in English with classmates who you are not so close with.	3.43	0.81
11	Making mistakes when presenting in English.	4.10	0.63
12	Doing assignments in English.	3.57	0.75
	Overall	3.57	0.49

Table 5: Scale for interpreting the level of anxiety

Mean	Level of anxiety
4.00 to 5.0	High
3.00 to 3.99	Medium/Moderate
1.00 to 2.99	Low

Table 6: Level of anxiety and Context

Level of anxiety	Item
High	2, 5, 6, 11
Medium/Moderate	1, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12
Low	3, 4

As evident in Tables 4, 5, and 6, the instructors perceive the students as experiencing varying degree of anxiety in the L2 classroom. The instructors also perceive that the students experience an overall moderate level of anxiety in the language classroom (mean = 3.57, SD = 0.49). This could be interpreted to mean that many of the language learning related activities are not highly anxiety provoking. In fact, based on the information in Table 6, only 4 out of 12 items were rated ‘high’. The rest were rated as moderate and low.

In terms of the language learning contexts, the instructors rated ‘Speaking English in front of everybody’ (item 2), ‘Answering instructor’s question in English’ (item 5), ‘Giving opinion in English’ (item 6), and ‘Making mistakes when presenting in English’ (item 11) as the contexts that make the students highly anxious. This finding is consistent with the findings of other studies in which having to get involved in any kind of speaking or oral activity appears to produce a high-level anxiety in the students (e.g. Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Masoud Hashemi & Moghtada Abbasi, 2013; Williams & Andrade, 2008).

Having to listen in English (items 3 & 4) is rated as causing very low-level anxiety in the students. This finding appears to support part of Lucas, Miraflores, and Go’s (2011) and Noro’s (2011) findings in which the students in their study also indicated a comparatively low-level anxiety for listening activities when compared to other tasks.

The rest of the contexts are rated as producing medium or moderate-level anxiety in the students. This appears to tally with the findings of various studies (e.g Mohammad Javad Riasati, 2011) in which these contexts do cause anxiety but nowhere as high as the contexts in which the students must get involved in various speaking activities (see Williams & Andrade, 2008).

To answer the third research question, a table (Table 7) that shows the ranking of the most to the least anxiety-provoking context as indicated by the students and the instructors was created.

Table 7: Ranking by the students and instructors

No	Questionnaire items	Student	Lecturer
1	Attending English class without enough preparation.	9	10

2	Speaking English in front of everybody.	1	1
3	Listening to instructor teaching in English.	11	11
4	Listening to classmates' conversation in English.	12	12
5	Answering instructor's question in English.	4	2
6	Giving opinion in English.	3	3
7	Interacting with classmates who are good in English language.	7	7
8	Thinking about one's level of mastery of English language.	5	5
9	Passing the English course with good result.	10	8
10	Interacting in English with classmates who you are not so close with.	6	9
11	Making mistakes when presenting in English.	2	4
12	Doing assignments in English.	8	6
13	Overall perceived level of anxiety	Moderate	Moderate

From the table, it could be seen that, in terms of ranking the language learning contexts according to their stress level, both students and instructors share the same sentiment on many of them. For example, both the students and instructors rated item 2 (Speaking English in front of everybody) as the number one stress-inducing context. They also shared the same thought for items 3, 4, 6, 7, 8. The instructors appear to overestimate items 5, 9, and 12, i.e. thinking that they would cause anxiety to the students; but, for the students, they ranked the items lower on the stress-inducing totem pole. Interestingly, item 11 (Making mistakes when presenting in English), was rated higher on the list of anxiety-inducing context by the students compared to their instructors. This could be interpreted to mean that the instructors probably thought that the students did not care and/or worry too much when they made mistakes; but, for the students, they did care and/or worry about it after all.

In general, both students and instructors have similar perspectives on language learning contexts that produce anxiety in the students. This finding differs from the findings by Allum (2020), Saeb (2017), and Brown (2009) in which there was a noticeable mismatch between the students' and the instructors' perceptions. As for this study, the reason as to why there is a significant match between the students' and the instructors' perspectives could be because the students and the instructors share many similar characteristics. For example, all of them are Malaysians; English is not their mother tongue; and they came from the same educational system. These similarities could be the reason as to why their perspectives are almost identical.

CONCLUSION

Learning a second language can be a daunting experience to many learners. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of them tend to experience varying degree of anxiety as they proceed with their language learning process. Since high level of anxiety has the potential to be destructive to the students' motivation and performance, language instructors need to play an active role in helping the students to manage their anxiety. Instructors need to be able to identify the level of anxiety associated with different learning contexts and then provide the appropriate and necessary support to the learners. By doing so, the instructors would be helping the students to regain their focus and maintain their motivation in learning the language.

Future research could investigate instructors' perspective on anxiety and how it is related to their choice of teaching or classroom activities. There is also a need for the development of a better, accurate instrument to help identify and measure the level of anxiety experienced by L2 learners in various language learning contexts. The fact that language anxiety can impede successful learning and mastering of the second language makes it extremely necessary for research in this area to continue.

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