

EXPLORING LANGUAGE ANXIETY OF MALAYSIAN LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports initial findings of a study on language anxiety of 205 Malaysian undergraduates of a public university towards learning English as a second language (L2). The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et al. 1986) was administered to groups of English language learners. The pre-scores from the questionnaire were calculated for descriptive statistics. This pilot study also aimed to confirm the reliability of the FLCAS as an instrument to measure potential sources of anxiety in language classrooms in Malaysian learning context.

Keywords: language anxiety, second language learners, FLCAS

INTRODUCTION

Learning English as a second language (ESL) causes many learners to experience language anxiety. Language anxiety is defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically in second-language contexts, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). The implementation of the National Education Policy in 1970 marked the unification of a system comprising Malay language as the medium of instruction whilst English was accorded the status of second language (L2). However, Malaysian learners are still inhibited by their social factors such as the lack of motivation and interest to learn English (Thang et.al, 2011). They result in problems of acquisition, retention and production of the language (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991), which ultimately affects their performance and grades. A study by a team of researchers from a local university in Malaysia revealed that local graduates failed to market themselves due to lacking personal qualities and communication skills. They emphasized skills in English as the most common issue of concern raised by employers (Shuib, 2005). The paucity of research within Malaysia on tertiary L2 learners' language anxiety has led to the undertaking of the present study.

FLCAS

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) developed a 36-item Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure the learners' anxiety levels. For analysis purposes, Horwitz (1986), MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) and several other researchers identify three related foreign language anxieties:

1. Communication apprehension, arising from learners' inability to adequately express mature thoughts and ideas;
2. Fear of negative social evaluation, arising from a learner's need to make a positive social impression on others;
and
3. Test anxiety, arising from learners' feelings of apprehension over academic evaluation

METHODOLOGY

This study reports the preliminary findings of the FLCAS section of the pre-test online questionnaire which was administered at the beginning of the semester. The population for the study consisted all undergraduate learners who enrolled for an English course which was also the compulsory university course registered in 15 faculties of a public university in Malaysia. They were invited to respond to the questionnaire which once launched was uploaded on the learning management system (LMS) of the university. A total of 205 questionnaires were returned. Exploratory data analysis on the FLCAS items were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for frequency. However, further analysis will be carried out.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Cronbach coefficient alpha referring to the internal reliability of the FLCAS section was 0.916, indicating that the internal consistency is satisfactorily reliable. Of the 205 respondents, 68 (33.2%) were male and 137 (66.8%) were female. The most frequent factor of anxiety for Malaysian language learners is fear of negative social evaluation when they need to respond in the L2. The Malaysian education system has a strong orientation toward the national based assessment and has generally produced learners who report that they worry very much if they might fail the English course and if they are being corrected by their English teachers. These characteristics indeed discourage and inhibit learning of the target language. The next most frequent anxiety factor is communication apprehension, which reflects the individual level of anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with other learners. Although they have adequate input of the target language, the learners' feelings of reticence, shyness, introversion, and social anxiety still impact their ability to communicate. The high importance placed on achieving good grades in examination further exacerbates the language learning process. It is also observed that anxiety is occurring at each stage of language learning namely acquisition (input), retention (processing) and production (output). It is occurring most often at the processing stage of learning when learners experience uneasiness learning and thinking in L2 and at the output stage when learners need to speak in the L2.

CONCLUSION

The present study confirms the recurring language anxiety at every stage of language learning. The pervasive emotions can be debilitating and learners' beliefs about the nature of language learning are difficult to change. While language teachers may have measures to reduce anxiety level of L2 learners, learners themselves should be more willing and active in using the language to achieve a more positive impact on learning.

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