

ASSESSING THE LANGUAGE ANXIETY OF MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Learning English language in Malaysian formal classroom learning is similar to learning other subjects. The formal learning of English language begins at the age of seven and continues until seventeen, at the end of secondary school. The subject of English language is taught by skills, namely reading, listening, writing and speaking. English language is continuously assessed at the school level as well as the national level. Malaysian University English Test is an indicator of the learners' English language proficiency as well as to determine the number of English language courses they need to take during their undergraduate programmes at higher education institutions in Malaysia. Nevertheless, Malaysian graduates limited incompetence in English communication skills is cited as a reason for their unemployment. Research has established that language anxiety is a consistent phenomenon in second language acquisition classrooms and presents an obstacle restricting learners from learning or acquiring a foreign language. This paper presents the research methodology on assessing the English language anxiety of first year Malaysian undergraduate learners. The study employed a mixed methods approach using the foreign language classroom anxiety scale as the quantitative research instrument, followed by the learners' reflective journals as a supportive secondary role to the data collection. There is no single best design to favour in every case but the selection of any research approach should be appropriate to research problem(s) of any study.

Field of Research: *Language anxiety, second language learners, foreign language classroom anxiety, mixed methods.*

1. Introduction

One of the most significant current discussions in the higher education institutions in Malaysia is unemployment among the local graduates. The number of unemployed among them is on the rise every year (Chew, 2013) and a comment made by Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin, the Minister of Higher Education, Malaysia, is that the local graduates had failed to deliver their soft skills effectively and communication skill was one of the four soft skills (4 punca utama graduan sukar

dapat pekerjaan, 2010, March 6; Roselina, 2009). The JobStreet.com English Language Assessment test provides a standardised yardstick to measure English competency of Malaysian graduates and substantiated that the graduates lack English communication skills (Si, 2011). Furthermore, a poll administered to human resource managers in November 2011 found that 50 percent of them argued that the local graduates demonstrated “poor communication skills and notably lack command of the English language”, making the managers reluctant to recruit them (Lim, 2013). The decision of the managers supports a report indicating that the two factors that make local graduates still jobless within the first six months after graduation are lack of language proficiency, particularly in English, and insufficient knowledge and competency in the jobs they applied for (The Star, 27.7.2013).

2. Language anxiety

Language anxiety is an important affective domain of learners which plays a key role in determining the success or failure of language learning (Oxford, 1990). Language anxiety includes emotions of self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, attitude and motivation (Shumin, 2002 cited in Richards & Renandya, 2011). For second language learners, learning a second language is a complex task and prone to human anxiety (Brown, 2007) that impacts the extent to which language learners participate during the course of language learning. In other words, if learners feel positive throughout the language learning they will participate more actively in the classroom and be more willing to engage in the learning activities. Consequently, this leads to achievement in language learning as well as successful language acquisition for the individual learners. On the other hand, learners who have negative attitudes towards learning the target language are associated with uneasiness, self-doubt, frustration and apprehension affecting cognition that will lead to poor performance in language learning, and this in turn affects the psychological state of the learners. Nevertheless, research has consistently shown that language anxiety is a consistent phenomenon in second language acquisition classrooms and it is an obstacle that hinders learners from learning or acquiring a foreign language (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

Foreign language anxiety is described as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language context including speaking, listening and learning” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 284). The learning demands complex and non-spontaneous mental operations required for communication. Any performance in the second language is likely to challenge self-concepts and lead to fear or even panic. Psychologically, anxiety is associated with subjective feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry as a result of an arousal of the autonomic nervous system (Spielberger, 1983). Anxiety has been found to interfere with many types of learning, not only language learning; thus, the affective factor is an important variable for research (Horwitz, 2001).

Foreign language anxiety is common among non-native speakers (Young, 1991) and this is seen as one of the great obstacles in foreign language learning. Earlier studies in language learning reported inconsistent results in attesting the existence of anxiety reactions (Horwitz, 2001; Trang, 2012). Thus, Scovel (1978) suggested that language researchers should specify the type of anxiety they were measuring. Then, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) proposed that foreign language anxiety was a situation-specific type of anxiety responsible for negative emotional reactions of learners learning language. They further explained the cause of anxiety is the inherent inauthenticity relating to immature second language communicative abilities. As a consequence, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) developed and offered the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) as a means to measure anxiety experienced during foreign language learning in the classroom. The instrument has not only resolved the issue of appropriate measurement of anxiety (Horwitz, 2001) but it has

“initiated many other studies in language anxiety” (Chan, Ain Nadzimah, & Nurkarimah, 2012, p. 157). The FLCAS, an instrument to measure language anxiety, has been widely accepted and used, demonstrating that it is a reliable scale to measure foreign language anxiety based on a number of subsequent studies. Furthermore, it is argued that second or foreign language learning is not affected by all forms of anxiety but only by a construct of anxiety specific to the language acquisition context (Gardner, 1985).

3. Theoretical framework

FLCAS is a self-report instrument assessing the degree of anxiety specific to foreign language classroom settings. Based on the learners’ self-report, clinical experience, a review of related instruments, and the researchers’ personal experience as language teachers, the instrument differentiates three main sources of language anxiety. The sources are the concepts that make up the FLCAS. The concepts and definitions of each as clarified by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) are:

1. Communication apprehension – a type of shyness characterised as fear of, or anxiety about, communicating with people (p. 127);
2. Fear of negative evaluation – the apprehension about others’ evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations (p. 128); and
3. Test anxiety - the type of performance anxiety resulting from a fear of failure in an academic evaluation setting (p. 127)

4. Review of literature

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the relationship between language anxiety and language skills that found learners who experienced language anxiety encountered specific task-performance issues. Reading is a skill learnt from linguistically comprehensible written texts in order to enhance the process of language acquisition (Richards & Renandya, 2011). There has been infrequent investigation on the sources of anxiety for the acquisition of reading skill (Al-Shboul, Sheikh Ahmad, Mohamad Sahari, & Zainurin, 2013; Saito, Horwitz, & Garza, 1999; Wu, 2011). Nevertheless, several attempts have been made to explore second or foreign language anxiety of a few first language learners including Arabic (Al-Shboul et al., 2013), Chinese (Huang, 2012; Tsai & Li, 2012), Persian (Jafarigozar & Behrooznia, 2012), Turkish (Ay, 2010), and other foreign language learners (Bensoussan, 2012).

The presence of anxiety is experienced not only by normal children, but also by gifted learners. This affective factor hinders language learners from acquiring the target language. To ascertain the difference of anxiety levels between the normal and gifted learners, a study carried out by Kamarulzaman et al. (2013) looked at the language anxiety experienced by the learners. The group of gifted learners showed excellence in the English language tests; however, their communication did not exhibit the same proficiency. A class of 119 Form 4 learners aged between 15 to 16 years old from a centre in Malaysia were involved in the exploration into their English speaking ability. The 33-items FLCAS scored on a five-point Likert scale (Horwitz et al., 1986) was administered to the learners. In addition, the English language final examination result was collected as a measure of language achievement of the learners. The findings of the study identified certain levels of English language anxiety of the gifted learners. However, there was no significant difference in the English language anxiety between the genders. In addition, a negative correlation was found between

English language anxiety and English language achievement. This finding implies that the higher the level of language anxiety of a learner, the lower the academic performance of the learner is.

The purpose of another study was to investigate whether test anxiety is related to learners' overall achievement scores, to determine what test anxiety producing factors affect learners, what anxiety symptoms are most prevalent among the learners, and how they can be alleviated according to learners' opinions (Noori, 2013). Thirty female Iranian learners of English as a foreign language, between the ages of 15 to 25 and with the same level of proficiency from high school and language institute, participated in the study. The findings of this study revealed that Iranian English as foreign language learners at high school were more test anxious in comparison to EFL learners at a language institute. Second, the formal achievement score was not correlated with test anxiety. Third, the learners mentioned that the most prevalent test anxiety factors were fear of negative evaluation, low proficiency and negative comments of the teachers before and after the exam.

A study to verify that language anxiety and achievement are negatively related was conducted in Pakistan with 149 undergraduate learners of English as a foreign language enrolled in second and sixth semester (Awan, Azher, Anwar, & Naz, 2010). Among the instruments used were the FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) and the learners' grade point average in English classes. The language anxiety and academic achievement were negatively correlated, indicating that as the level of anxiety increases, the academic achievement decreases. Other findings of the study included that male learners were significantly more anxious than the female learners and the learners with parents who were illiterate or less educated were more anxious than learners with parents who were more educated.

A study with Korean university learners of English revealed that the female learners were more anxious compared to male learners (G.-P. Park & French, 2013). The undergraduate learners were from various disciplines and enrolled in an English conversation course. Another finding was that gender and anxiety measured by the FLCAS were significantly related to L2 performance determined by a final grade, with females and high anxiety students receiving a higher grade than males and low anxiety learners, respectively.

5. Research objective

Teachers and researchers conduct empirical research "to determine what they can and should do to facilitate language learning" (Nunan & Bailey, 2009, p. 5). Teachers attempt to understand the learning process that learners go through in learning English language by conducting classroom investigations to find answers to questions of pedagogy (Nunan & Bailey, 2009). Malaysian undergraduate learners are heterogeneous in terms of age, background factors, learning styles and learning strategies. These are the factors that are believed to cause learning the English language to be a complex process for both learners as the knowledge receivers and the language instructors as the knowledge providers.

In the context of this study, Malaysian learners selected from a local higher education institution had approximately the same limited English proficiency. It is compulsory for all undergraduates to take a minimum of one English language course. Learners who enroll for undergraduate programmes at the university are assigned to English language courses depending on the results they achieved on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Learners who achieved band 1 and 2 in MUET would have to take one English language course, namely English for Academic Purposes before they enroll for the two university English language courses and one elective English language course. Learners who

achieved band 3 and 4 in MUET are required to take two English language courses and one elective English language course. Learners who achieved band 5 and 6 would need to take a minimum of one English language course as an elective subject.

The groups of learners were purposively selected from two different disciplines – Science and Engineering. They were enrolled in an English oral interaction course designed for learners who achieved band 3 (modest user) or band 4 (competent user) in MUET. This study was aimed at identifying factors that may impact English language oral interaction competency of the Malaysian undergraduate. The research question to guide this study is:

To what extent do Malaysian undergraduate learners differ in language anxiety?

Most studies on second or foreign language anxiety have been carried out on undergraduate second or foreign language learners (Akbari & Sadeghi, 2013; Atasheneh & Izadi, 2012; Awan et al., 2010; Khattak, Jamshed, Ahmad, & Baig, 2011). Up to this point, however, Malaysian studies are very limited. There is only one study on language anxiety on gifted learners from secondary schools in Malaysia (Kamarulzaman et al., 2013), one study on a group of international learners studying English language at one of the private higher education institutions in Malaysia (Rajanthran, Prakash, & Ainawati, 2013) and another study on final year learners at a public university in Malaysia (Chan et al., 2012). No research was found that investigated language anxiety of first year undergraduate learners learning oral interaction skills in Malaysian learning contexts. The aim of this paper is to explain the research design adopted for this study.

6. Research design

A research approach encompasses “the plan or proposal to conduct research, involves the intersection of philosophy, research designs, and specific methods” (Creswell, 2014, p. 5) as illustrated in Figure 1.

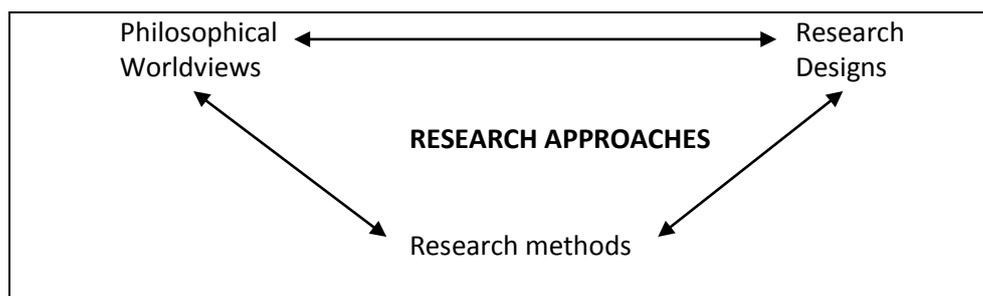


Figure 1 A framework for research (adopted from Creswell, 2014, p. 5)

The first agenda a researcher needs to decide is the philosophical worldview. The philosophical worldview proposed for this research study is a pragmatic worldview that believes in actions, situations, and consequences (Creswell, 2014) by perceiving and experiencing the world (Morgan, 2007). The next agenda in a research framework is deciding the research design appropriate for the specific research study. With reference to the research problems highlighted in Section 5, mixed methods design is appropriate. The central premise of mixed methods research design combines or

integrates qualitative data (open-ended without predetermined responses) and quantitative data (closed-ended responses) in a research study (Creswell, 2014). In regards to the mixed methods design, the extended explanatory sequential mixed methods approach is appropriate for the research objective. In the design, the quantitative data type is the basis and the qualitative data provides a supportive, secondary role as illustrated in Figure 2.

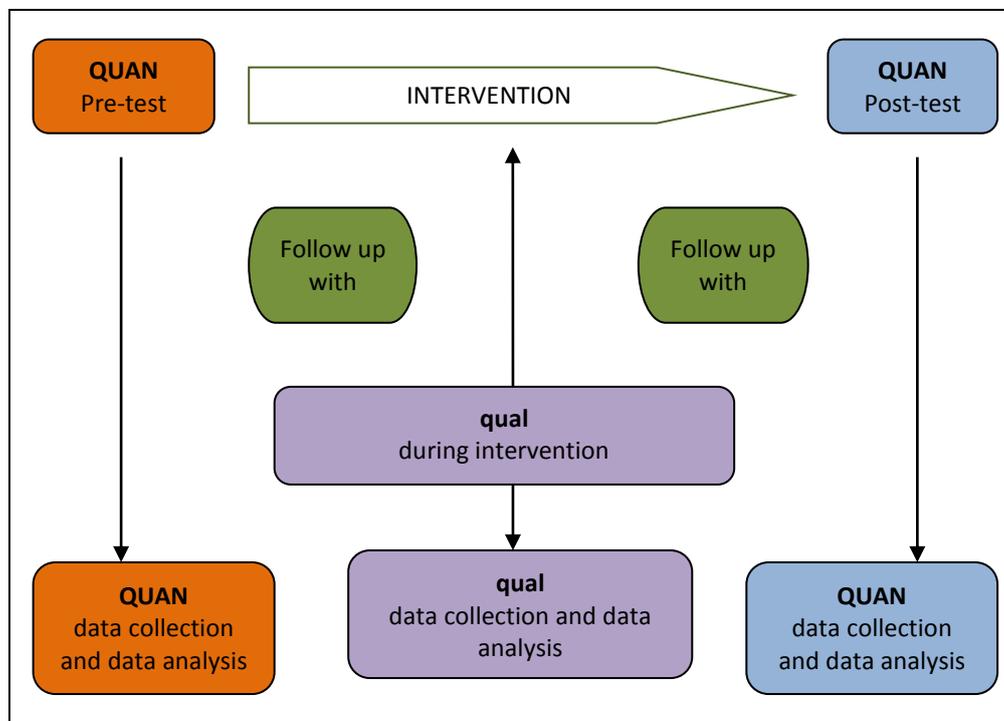


Figure 2 Extended Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design (adapted from Creswell, 2014, p. 220)

The participants for the study consisted of 76 first year undergraduate learners who were enrolled in Science and Engineering programmes at a higher education institution in Malaysia. They were selected on the basis of purposeful sampling as the researcher intentionally selected the learners based on the purpose of the research (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007).

The research methods employed for this research design are online survey questionnaires, course assessments and reflective journals. The main instrument is the online survey questionnaire used to obtain quantitative responses to specific predetermined questions. Online surveys are low cost, fast and efficient to reach a target audience and provide direct data entry. For the study, both pre- and post-tests survey questionnaires were prepared using the Qualtrics online tool. The first section of the pre-test survey questionnaire solicits demographic information of the learner-participants namely, faculty, academic year, age, gender, nationality, ethnic groups, first language, English language experience and English language proficiency. The researcher was granted permission from the developer to use the FLCAS which was adapted for the second section as the English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELCAS). In the original instrument the term “foreign language” was used but was replaced with “English language” in the survey questionnaire to adapt to the target language. The section listed the 33-items of the ELCAS to determine the level of anxiety on three components - communicative apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Each of the thirty-three items of the ELCAS was answered on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “Neither agree nor disagree” (3) and to “strongly agree” (5). At the end of the

semester, the post-test survey was administered to the same learners to find out the difference on language anxiety.

The FLCAS has been extensively tested and widely used to investigate foreign language learning anxiety. Reliability and validity analyses were conducted on the ELCAS to assess the quality of the adapted scale for this study. The internal consistency reliability achieved an alpha coefficient of .92 implying that instrument was a good reliable instrument to measure English language anxiety of Malaysian learners. According to Sekaran (2009) the closer the reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) is to 1.0 the better it is and those values over 0.8 are considered as good.

The next set of quantitative data was the course assessment results of the English oral course. The learners' results achieved were categorized into the English language descriptor. These results are used for post-test evaluation. The learners were in their first year undergraduate programmes enrolled in the English oral course based on their achievement in MUET. The MUET results categorized the learners according to English language proficiency descriptor which was used as the pre-test evaluation. Comparisons were made against both of these results to determine the difference in language anxiety.

Reflective journals are excellent tools to reflect on the learning process (Borg, 2001). The learners were advised to record the learning process throughout the semester to complement quantitative data. When checking on this task, it was noted that many of the learners were not able to record their reflection after every lesson. Subsequently, the teacher-researcher assigned guided reflective journal topics from time to time. When the researcher thought of getting information about an action or issues, she wrote the topics on the whiteboard in the classroom and allocated about ten minutes for the learners to write in their journals. The journal writings were collected at the end of class sessions of every assignment.

7. Data analysis

First, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 21.0 for Windows was used to store and analyse the quantitative data. Before the data were statistically analysed, a battery of parametric statistical tests were run beginning with detecting outliers among cases and assessing normality. That was followed by descriptive statistics for the researcher to meaningfully describe the data namely, central tendency (mean); dispersion (range, variance and standard deviation); and frequencies (raw data and percentages) (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). Next was inferential statistics namely reliability analysis, cross-tabulation, independent samples t-test, paired samples t-test and the last ANOVA (Gay et al., 2006). The online survey responses from Qualtrics either from the pre- or post-test questionnaire were exported to SPSS directly. However, many of the learner-participants responded to the emailed post-test questionnaire. After receiving their replies to the survey, the researcher had to manually key-in the responses on the SPSS spreadsheet for further analysis.

Next is Nvivo (<http://www.qsrinternational.com>), distributed by QSR International in Australia and used to assist in analyzing, managing and shaping qualitative data. The process to analyze qualitative data is similar to manual coding where the researcher still needs to do the coding and categorizing (Creswell, 2013). The typed out notes in Microsoft Word documents were imported to Nvivo installed on the teacher-researcher's office computer. Content analysis was applied to categorise the data. To analyse each node, the researcher opened the source, and in this research it was the reflective journals, and began the coding process. The first coding process was open coding by reading the text reflectively to generate relevant codes; the second coding process was axial coding

by exploring the relationship of categories and making connections between them; the last coding process was selective coding to explicate a story from the interconnection of these categories (Creswell, 2009).

8. Results

To assess the differences between the pre- and post-test of English language anxiety, communicative apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety, the paired samples t-test was used. There is a statistically significant difference decrease in the intensity of English language anxiety, communicative apprehension and fear of negative evaluation for the Science learners. The test anxiety level is found to be lower for the post-test than the pre-test but the difference is not significant. There is not statistically significant difference on English language anxiety in general, communicative apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety for the Engineering learners.

9. Conclusion

The paper aims to describe the research methodology adopted for a research study on assessing language anxiety of Malaysian first year learners. The study did not aim to evaluate the outcome quantitatively only; thus, a qualitative research instrument was also adopted as to get the insights of 'interesting' issues from the perspective of the learners. After analyzing the data from both research instruments, the findings are merged to understand the problem.

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