

Language Anxiety among English major students in a less competitive Context

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ABSTRACT

Language anxiety in the classroom is known as one of the negative factors that reduce learners' proficiency. This study aimed to investigate undergraduate EFL English major students' language anxiety. The objectives of the study were 1) to explore learners' language anxiety levels, 2) to find out the relationship between language anxiety and their achievement in foreign language courses, and 3) to investigate sources of language anxiety participants experienced in their language classroom. Ninety five students of the first year to the fourth year at a small college in the south of Thailand participated in the study. The research instrument applied in the study were FLCAS - the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale developed by Horwitz et al (1986) and their English grade point average. The results revealed that the majority of participants are in moderate anxiety level. The low anxious students had higher English GPA. Worry about failing English class was the major source of anxiety. The findings encourage teachers' awareness of students' language anxiety in their language classroom context.

Keywords: language anxiety, foreign language, achievement, FLCAS

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning foreign languages is very important now, especially English which said to be spoken and understood by all or most of the world's population. In this relation, language teaching and learning is extremely crucial and needs a continual improvement. However, there are some problems among English learners which cause them far from achievement. As substantial amount of research has suggested that one of the affective filters – anxiety- has a great adverse effect on second and foreign language learning. It is a remarkably widespread phenomenon among language learners everywhere. A number of studies have shown that language learners encounter language anxiety, for example, Horwitz (2000) estimated that around one third of learners experience language anxiety, while Liu and Jackson (2008) suggested that the number is likely to be higher. Campbell and Ortiz (1999) noticed that one half of all language students experience negative effect of language anxiety. MacIntyre (1995) also stated that up to one half of language learners experience debilitating anxiety. Furthermore, Horwitz and Young (1991) estimated that half of the students taking language courses experience debilitating anxiety.

Language anxiety blocks and impedes learners' development of second language fluency and performance in classroom. According to Krashen, anxiety also contributes to an affective filter which prevents learners from acquiring language from the available input (Lightbown and Spada, 1999, 2006); then learners fail to take in the available target language messages and language acquisition does not progress (Horwitz et al, 1986).

In Thailand, English is used as a foreign language. It is not employed as the main language in communication. Although Thai students learn English for 9-12 years, many would not have fulfilled high level of competence in English (Pornthanomwong et al, 2019). One of the major problems in learning English experienced by Thai Learners is lack of opportunities to use English outside their classroom (Kurakan, 2021; Supasan, 2021). While English continues to play an important role in Thai education, English learning and teaching need to be better focused. As many learners use English mainly in their classroom, their anxiety becomes a significant barrier in their learning situation, undermining their efforts at language acquisition. Teachers are the basis of the educational process and

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their role is important. Conversely, teachers can also be one of the possible contributors to learners' anxiety (Chinpakdee, 2015). Therefore, it is necessary for language teachers to actively find out whether their students are suffering from language anxiety. If they do, this is the case teachers need to support and help their students to learn a foreign language happily, smoothly and successfully.

This study took place at a small college where students' background is broadly similar. Number of students in most classes are less than 30. The small class size results in better communication between teachers and students as well as among students contributing to a relaxed class atmosphere, and a less competitive context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Anxiety and Language anxiety

In the context of psychological theory, anxiety was first explained by Freud as something felt an unpleasant affective state or condition associated with nervousness, apprehension, or anxious expectation (Spielberger, 1966). Furthermore, scholars stated that anxiety concerns with the feeling of frustration, uneasiness, worry, stress, fear, tension, or nervousness (Arnold & Brown, 1999; Horwitz et al, 1991; Horwitz, 2001).

In terms of the foreign language anxiety, Horwitz et al, (1986:128) defined language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process”. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) and MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) stated language anxiety as the feeling of apprehension experienced in a situation related to the requirement of using a second language including listening, speaking, reading, or writing, in which learners do not feel fully competent.

2.2 Facilitative Anxiety and Debilitative Anxiety

Although most language research shows the negative relationship between language anxiety and learners' performance, the positive mode of anxiety exists. Alpert and Haber (1960) distinguished two types of anxiety: facilitative and debilitative anxiety (cited in Marcos-Llinas and Garau, 2009). Facilitative anxiety or helpful anxiety (Oxford, 1999) is a positive factor which facilitate learners in some ways, such as keeping learners alert (Scovel, 1978 cited in Oxford, 1999). According to Bailey (1983), he found that facilitative anxiety was one of the keys to success, and closely related to competitiveness. On the contrary, Horwitz (1990) stated that anxiety is only helpful for very simple learning task, but not with more complicated learning such as language learning (cited in Oxford, 1999). Debilitative anxiety or harmful anxiety is negative kind of anxiety. It harms learners' performance in many ways, both directly reducing participation and indirectly creating worry and self-doubt (Oxford, 1999). Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) mentioned that the strongest or negative correlate of language achievement is anxiety (cited in Oxford, 1999) which can be seen from many studies like, Aida (1994), Horwitz (1986), MacIntyre and Gardner (1991).

2.3 Effects of Language Anxiety on Achievement

It has been investigated that language anxiety is one of the best predictors of foreign language achievement (Onwueguzie et al, 1999; Toth, 2007; Liu and Huang, 2011). Many studies have been conducted to find out the effect of language anxiety, in term of the relationship between language anxiety and language learning achievement, for example, Awan et al (2010) conducted a survey study with 149 undergraduate students from different departments of a university in Pakistan. The result showed the achievement and language anxiety were negatively related to each other, that is to say, high achievement was related to low language anxiety. They described that high anxious students usually get discouraged, have low self-esteem, avoid participant and abandon their learning tasks. Amiri and Ghonsooly's (2015) study with 258 freshmen majoring in different fields of medicine found a significant and negative correlation between students' anxiety scores and their performance in their final examination. In the same vein, the study of Tan and Xie (2020) with 41 English major freshmen

in a college in China showed language anxiety was negatively related to learners' performance in oral English. Balakrishnan et al (2020) examined the level of language anxiety and language achievement of 125 diploma students of Technical University. They found that students experienced a moderate level of anxiety and there was a significant negative relationship between English language achievement and learners' language anxiety scores. Bensalem's (2017) study showed most of participants in an Arabic-French speaking university context experienced moderate level of anxiety while the relationship between learners level of anxiety and their exam scores reported a significant negative. On the contrary, Razak et al (2017) revealed non significant correlation between the level of language anxiety and academic achievement among university EFL students. Along the same lines, the study of Fadillah (2010) with 152 students found no significant relationship between English language anxiety and students' achievement in English as a foreign language as a whole but a significant negative correlation between students' achievement and test anxiety was indicated while the participants' anxiety was at moderate level. However, the meta-analysis study by Botes et al (2020) examined the relationship between language anxiety and five form of academics achievement, namely general academic, listening, speaking, reading and writing academic achievement. The results confirmed the negative association between language anxiety and academic achievement in foreign language courses.

2.4 Causes of language anxiety

Horwitz et al (1986) claimed that foreign language anxiety concerns performance evaluation within an academic and social context, they grouped these parallels in FLCAS into three groups: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Lucas et al, (2011) divided the 33-item questionnaire into three related performance anxiety as Horwitz proposed. Moreover, one additional factor- English classroom anxiety- was combined to those elements. In this study, the items presented in FLCAS as reflective of the four groups as Lucas et al (2011) mentioned were applied for an analysis.

2.5 Foreign Language Anxiety in Thai context

Research studies on foreign language anxiety (FLA) among Thai learners of different levels and majors, such as, the study by Sankueana and Sucaromana (2018), where foreign language classroom anxiety of approximately six hundred Thai high school students from different backgrounds of English learning and teaching was explored. The findings showed that students experienced moderate level of foreign language classroom anxiety. The studies of different majors of undergraduates were also investigated. To illustrate, Chinpakdee (2015) found that learners in Thai EFL context have encountered high level of anxiety both inside and outside the classroom. Kurakan (2021) investigated anxiety in English Oral Presentations of engineering students and noticed that overall anxiety level of students was at moderate. Low-anxious and high-anxious students experienced the same problem in lack of English vocabulary and grammar. Basilio and Wongrak (2017) discovered that both English Major and Non-English Major students encountered language anxiety in their class. Sampaonthong and Simpson (2019) explored year 1 to 4 English major students in terms of their college year and their language proficiency level. They found that students of all college year and all language levels had moderate level of language anxiety. Akkakoson (2016) stated that speaking-in-class anxiety among 282 students taking English Conversation course was found to be moderate while in Kalra and Siribud's (2020) study, public speaking anxiety was discovered to cause some problems, for example, in self-confidence, self-esteem that obstruct proficiency in foreign language. In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, English classes were taken online across the country. Somchob and Sucaromana (2022) explored foreign language anxiety in English online learning of 183 secondary school students. The results indicated that FLA among students was at moderate level. As sources of anxiety, unpreparedness and self-concept seemed to be main factors (Palaleo and Srikarjang 2018) while course achievement, peer pressure and self-image were another sources of language anxiety in Tantihachai's (2016) study. Chinpakdee (2015) found that academic assessment, negative evaluations, comprehension problems and teachers caused language anxiety.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher decided to use survey as a research method to collect data because one of the survey's purpose is to obtain attitudes (Nunan, 1992; Marshall and Rossman, 1995) and in this present study, the researcher intended to investigate students' feeling in foreign language classroom. Questionnaire considered as the technique which is the heart of one type of survey research to collect data (Blaxter et al, 1996) was used to gather information from participants.

This study aimed to investigate the language anxiety among English major students in a small college, its relation with the achievement in English courses, and sources of language anxiety. Accordingly, the following research questions were put forward.

1. What are the language anxiety level of English major students in the college?
2. Is there any relationship between students' language anxiety and their achievement in English courses?
3. What are sources of language anxiety participants experience in their language classroom?

3.1 Participants

Participants in the study were the first, second, third and fourth year undergraduate students majoring in English at a small college in the south of Thailand. There were 95 (90.48%) of them out of 105 participated in the study. Only 10 students were absent on the day of completing questionnaires (see Table 1). All participants participated voluntarily in the study. Moreover, they signed their names to show that they were willing to join the study and also gave a permission to get their grade results from the registrar of the college.

Table 1: Number of students and number of participants

Year of Student	Total number of students	Number of participants	Percentage
Year 1	20	18	90.00%
Year 2	26	21	80.77%
Year 3	28	26	92.86%
Year 4	31	30	96.77%
Total	105	95	90.48%

3.2 Research Instruments

The instruments used in the study were the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and participants grade results- only results from English courses they enrolled were used in the study.

The FLCAS is a 33-item self-assessment questionnaire designed by Horwitz et al (1986) was translated to Thai. Each item on the scale is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (Strongly disagree). The possible range of scores is 33-165. When statements were negative, responses were reversed and recoded, so the high score represented high anxiety. The total 24 items are worded in anxious way, while 9 items (2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 19, 22, 28, and 32) are worded in non-anxious direction. In the study, the FLCAS has demonstrated reliability, achieving an alpha coefficient of .89 as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Reliability Coefficients of the FLCAS

Number of cases	93.0
Number of items	33
Alpha	.8908

To measure their achievement in English learning, their English courses grade results were used. The researcher got their transcripts of record from the registrar after participants' permission and after the approval of the registrar. Then only English courses grades were calculated to the average point which has the total score of 4.00.

3.3 Procedure

To collect the data, participants filled in the consent form. They spent about 20 minutes to complete the FLCAS questionnaires during the class time, inquiring the participants' language anxiety and their sources of anxiety. The SPSS program was used to analyse participants' responses obtained from the questionnaires. Then their English grade point average (English GPA) were calculated and used in order to examine the relationship between their anxiety levels and their achievement in language learning.

4. RESULTS

4.1 What are the language anxiety level of English major students in the college?

The level of language anxiety was categorized into 3 groups- low anxiety level, moderate anxiety level, and high anxiety level. Only three students are in the low anxiety level. The scores ranged from 46-66 (Mean=56.67), fifty five students are in moderate anxiety group with 80 minimum and 105 maximum score (Mean=94.85), and thirty three students are in high anxiety group with 106 and 135 maximum score (Mean = 116.76).

Table 3: Language Anxiety Levels

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Low Anxiety	3	46	66	56.67	10.066
Moderate Anxiety	55	80	105	94.85	6.913
High Anxiety	33	106	135	116.76	7.467

The findings revealed that the majority of participants who experience high anxiety are students in the first year (33.3%), the second year (27.3%), and the fourth year (24.2%) respectively. Interestingly, the least number of students who are in the high anxiety group was in the third year (15.2%). From the analysis procedure, there were 4 incomplete data which made the total of participants 91 as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Summary of students' anxiety Levels

Anxiety Level	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Total
Low Anxiety	0	0	1	2	3
Moderate Anxiety	7	10	19	19	55
High Anxiety	11	9	5	8	33
Incomplete data	-	2	1	1	4
Total	18	21	26	30	95

4.2 The relationship between language anxiety levels and their achievement on foreign language learning.

In the study, participants' English GPA was calculated and examine in order to find out the relationship between their language anxiety levels and their achievement on English courses. Table 5 shows the grade results of participants in the three anxiety levels. The average grade of students in a low anxiety group is 3.25 while the moderate group and the high anxiety group are 2.75 and 2.73 respectively.

Table 5: Average English GPA of participants in different language anxiety level

Anxiety Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% of Confidence Interval for Mean	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low Anxiety	3	3.2467	.85049	.49103	1.1339	5.3594
Moderate Anxiety	55	2.7542	.70452	.09500	2.5637	2.9446
High Anxiety	33	2.7258	.63392	.11035	2.5010	2.9505
Total	91	2.7601	.68199	.07149	2.6181	2.9021

The table below shows the range of minimum and maximum English GPA of students in three groups of anxiety levels. The lowest grade is in high anxiety group (1.33) while the highest grade is in the moderate anxiety group (4.00).

Table 6: Minimum and maximum English GPA of each anxiety level group

Anxiety Level	Minimum GPA	Maximum GPA
Low Anxiety Level	2.28	3.88
Moderate Anxiety Level	1.38	4.00
High Anxiety Level	1.33	3.66
Total	1.33	4.00

4.3 Causes of language anxiety participants experience in their language classroom

In accordance with the four-categorized factors as Lucas et al (2011) suggested, findings will be presented in percentage. The three highest score above 50 % will be presented

4.3.1 Communication anxiety refers to a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people. It consists of item number 1, 9, 14, 18, 24, 27, 29 and 32. The three highest scores were “*I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in the English class*” (68.5%), “*I get nervous when I don’t understand every word the language teacher says*” 62.1%), and “*I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class*” (51.6%).

4.3.2 Fear of negative evaluation identifies as “an apprehension about others’ evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively. This cause consists of item number 3, 7, 13, 15, 20, 23, 25, 31, and 33. The three highest scores were “*I get nervous when the instructor asks questions that I haven’t prepared*” (62.1%), “*I can feel my heart pounding when I’m going to be called on in class*” (58.9%), and “*I tremble when I know that I’m going to be called on in the English Class*” (55.8%).

4.3.3 Test anxiety is the type of performance stemming from a fear of failure consists of item number 2, 8, 10, 19, and 21. There was only one item with score above 50% - “*I worry about the consequences of failing my English class*” (76.9%).

4.3.4 English classroom anxiety includes teacher and teaching styles. This comprises of item number 4, 5, 6, 11, 12, 16, 17, 22, 26, 28, and 30. The highest scores were “*Even if I am well prepared for the English class, I feel anxious about it*” (64.2%), “*It wouldn’t bother me at all to take more English classes*” (disagree 55.8%), “*In English class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know*” (55.8%).

5. DISCUSSIONS

As stated earlier, the study aimed to pinpoint the level of language anxiety among English major students in a small college which seems to provide a less competitive context. The second purpose was

to discover the relationship between language anxiety and learners' achievement. The third objective was to figure out causes of language anxiety participants encountered.

The first important finding clearly showed the learners faced language anxiety in their language classroom situation. This is in line with many studies which disclosed language learners experience language anxiety in their language learning class (Kurakan (2021); Balakrishnan et al., (2020); Sankueana and Sucaromana (2018); Bensalem, (2017); Fadillah, (2010); Liu and Jackson, 2008; Horwitz, 2000; Campbell and Ortiz, 1999; MacIntyre, 1995). Most participants in the study experienced moderate level of FLA which was similar to the level reported in previous studies by Kurakan (2021); Balakrishnan et al., (2020); Sankueana and Sucaromana (2018); Bensalem, (2017); Fadillah, (2010). Moreover, the FLA of English major learners studied by Sampothong and Simpson (2019) was also at moderate level. However, high level of FLA was found in students taking Reading and Writing course (Chinpakdee, 2015).

In addition, our study showed that a small number of highly anxious students were in the first year, second year, and fourth year while the third year students seemed to be more relaxed. An explanation might be that the first year and second year students are new to the major, and might have some concern about learning a language in the classroom. The fourth year students are close to graduation, and may thus have the prospects about their future in relation to language learning foremost on their minds.

Regarding the second research question related to anxiety levels and the achievement, the result demonstrated that the highest average grade was from the group of low anxious students. This means that the average English GPA of students in low anxiety level group were higher than ones in moderate and high anxiety levels. Thus, students with low anxiety tend to have higher grade results, and this seems to be concordant with the study of Fadillah (2021). However, with regard to individual's maximum grade, the student with highest grade (4.00) was in the moderate anxiety group.

The third research question explored causes or sources of language anxiety among participants. The three major sources of anxiety emerged from the FLCAS. First, 'worry about failing in English class' made learners feel most anxious as indicated by highest score among all items. The result showed 76.9% of participants strongly agree and agree. This cause of anxiety was in the same line with Bensalem (2017). Second, 'the feeling of panic when they have to speak without preparation in English class' causes learners anxious. The result indicated participants agree with this item 68.5%. Third, learners feel anxious although they are well prepared for the English class. They rated this item 64.2%. This source of anxiety is in line with the study of Palaleo and Srikarjang (2018). According to the findings, the three major sources of language anxiety were from the category of Test anxiety, Communication anxiety, and English classroom anxiety. However, Fear of negative evaluation is another noticeable category as learners rated 62.1% (I get nervous when the instructor asks questions that I haven't prepared).

6. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, the study examined language anxiety among English major students in a small college. The findings showed that most participants experienced moderate level of anxiety. Worry about failing in English class, speaking without preparation in English class, and well preparation aroused anxiety in English class were identified as main sources of language anxiety. Finally, low anxious students tend to have higher language achievement.

In the light of the findings, some implications are suggested. The data in the study showed sources of anxiety related to language classroom. They worry about failing English class. Thus, it is necessary to create relaxed atmosphere in language class. Another three sources associated with preparation. They were anxious although they were well prepared and definitely unprepared tasks lead them to anxiety. In this relation, teacher instructions and classroom activities should be organized in order to decrease their anxiety. However, anxious students might suffer from their anxiety especially in their classroom situation. Language teachers play a vital role in language class in order to help learners reduce their anxiety, for example, find appropriate teaching techniques, create an anxiety-free environment.

The study has some limitations. First, it was a small scale quantitative study as the data was collected from only one small college. A larger size of sampling from various institutions may provide more understanding about the participants' language anxiety. Second, this study applied a quantitative data collection. Qualitative methods like interviews may offer more in depth information. High anxious students will be focused for future research, especially their sources of anxiety in order to find strategies to cope with their anxiety.

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