A Study on English Language Anxiety among Adult Learners in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM)

Nur Afiqah binti Ab. Latif*

Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Penang, Permatang Pauh, 13500, Penang, Malaysia

Abstract

This research was carried out to investigate English (second) language anxiety among adult learners in UTM SPACE as well as to study the factors influencing the level of language anxiety. Three demographic factors namely gender, age and years of learning English were used as the variables. Besides, another three contributing factors of language anxiety described by Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986), which are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and general feeling of anxiety were also be examined. The respondents of this research consisted of 132 UTM SPACE students. The instrument used was adapted from Horwitz (1983) likert scale, the Foreign Language Classroom Scale (FLCAS) which was changed to English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELCAS) since the focus of this research is on English language. A number of statistical analyses were employed in order to analyze the data including descriptive statistics, Pearson Correlation and Multiple Regressions. The results obtained indicate that there is a significant relationship between language anxiety and years of learning English, while no significant relationship was obtained regarding gender and age. Finally, the Multiple Regressions analysis revealed that UTM SPACE students predominantly experienced a general feeling of anxiety in learning English.

1.0 Introduction

English language is a language that is widely used for international communication worldwide, including for business, social networking and education. According to Doms (2003), English has become part of almost everyone’s life and its multiple crucial roles now influence every level in society. In Malaysia, it is compulsory for...
all government schools to teach the National language as the main language while English is taught as a second language (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). Despite learning English for about 10 years in school, most Malaysians still encounter difficulty in using the language effectively. One of the variables that affects second language learning is language anxiety. The English/second language learner often feel stressed, nervous or anxious while learning the language and some even face a ‘mental block’ during language learning (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). This problem occurs among both beginners and advanced learners of English as a second language. Correspondingly, it has been identified by Campbell and Ortiz (1991) that university students encounter language anxiety, with approximately one half of the language learners experiencing debilitating levels of language anxiety.

Due to the impact this exerts on English language learners, many researchers have studied the relationship between anxiety and second/foreign language learning. Horwitz et al. (1986) in fact developed a five point likert scale – the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) – which aims to investigate students’ anxiety related to foreign language learning in the classroom context. As stated by Horwitz et al. (1986), there are three main contributing factors to language anxiety which are communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. They further define communication apprehension as “a type of shyness characterized by fear or anxiety about communicating with people”. This includes difficulty in public interaction and in listening to, or learning a spoken language. Besides that, Horwitz et al. also described test anxiety as “a type of performance anxiety” characterised by a feeling of fear at failing the test (1986). MacIntyre & Gardner (1989) subsequently described test anxiety as a situation-specific trait or state that refers to examinations and feelings of apprehension over academic evaluation. The third contributing factor of language anxiety is the fear of negative evaluation, described as feelings of nervousness about others’ evaluations, and the anticipation that one would be negatively evaluated (Watson & Friend, 1969, as cited in Horwitz et al., 1986).

1.1. Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to investigate the levels of English language anxiety experienced by adult students in UTM and the relationship between this anxiety with their demographic background namely gender, age and number of years learning English. In addition, this study also aims to determine which one of the three factors of language anxiety (communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and a general feeling of anxiety) is the dominant factor that influences UTM students in learning English. The following research questions will be the focus of this study:

1. What are the levels of anxiety experienced by UTM adult students in learning the English language?

2. Is there any relationship between the students’ demographic background (age, genders and number of years learning English) and the level of anxiety?

3. What is the dominant factor of language anxiety among UTM adult students in learning English?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Anxiety in Second/Foreign Language Learning

In second/foreign language learning, the feeling of fear, stress or nervousness could hamper students’ learning of the language and may negatively affect their performance. As cited by Guiora (1993) Horwitz et al. (1986) have stated that “Learning a language itself is a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition because it directly threatens an individual’s ‘self-concept’ and world-view”. According to Spielberger (1983), anxiety in language learning is viewed as a psychological issue on the part of the learners. It is related to our nervous system and consequently our motions and ability to learn a language are also affected. Hence Horwitz et al. (1986) stated that anxiety in language
learning is categorized as a specific anxiety reaction where the learners only experience anxiety in specific situations. MacIntyre (1999: 56) similarly described a situation specific anxiety as an anxiety that occurs “in a particular specific situation”. He also mentioned that foreign language anxiety is related to conditions involved in language learning that requires learners to use the foreign language. In L2 learning, attention has been given to anxiety because of its considerable effects on L2 learners (Horwitz et al., 1986; Price, 1991). According to MacIntyre & Gardner (1989), the possible existence of language anxiety in various skills of L2 learning represents one of the constant challenges to teachers, since it can negatively affect the optimal process of learning and teaching in the classroom. Furthermore, Crookall and Oxford (1991: 52) claimed that “serious language anxiety may cause other related problems with self-esteem, self-confidence, and risk-taking ability, and ultimately hampers proficiency in the second language”.

2.2 Language Anxiety and Gender

Gender differences have been reported as one of the variables in language anxiety in which females have a greater advantage compared to males (Kamarul Shukri et al., 2009). It is believed that female learners are better at coping with language learning strategies and this enables them to be better at language learning due to their “greater social orientation, stronger verbal skills, and greater conformity to norms, both linguistic and academic” (Oxford, 1989 cited in Kamarul Shukri et al 2009: 404). By contrast, other research has also found that females by nature feel more anxious than male (Wicks-Nelson and Israel, 2006). Females are usually considered to be shyer than males, which enhances their feelings of anxiety compared to males in many cases. Besides this, Bernat and Lloyd’s (2007) study which explores the effects of gender on EFL learners’ beliefs about language learning found that males were more likely to enjoy the experience of practising English with native speakers than females. However, there are studies that show no significant difference in communication anxiety between genders because according to Rosenfeld and Berko (1990), both genders actually respond in the same way to certain situations in the language classroom whereby no significant effect was found when considering differences in gender. Mahfuzah Rafek (2009) has added that despite gender difference, the students in her study were all conscious about their own performance and both genders demonstrated similar signs of anxiety such as nervousness and panic in the language class.

2.3 Language Anxiety and Age

Age is significant to language anxiety in terms of certain factors where it accounts for the differences in the way of thinking, learning ability and learning styles. Although Sila (2010) has asserted that young children and adolescents may experience language anxiety similar to what adult learners experience, it is still believed that there are different cognitive styles between a child, adolescent and adult learner. Children are always believed to learn better through example while adults learn better by rules. Faizah Abd Majid, Siti Hawa Othman and Khairerzhan Rahmat (2007) mention that adult learners are different to other learners in that they have many roles that would enable them to shape more positive societal values, behaviour and thinking. Apart from that, the number of years spent learning English is investigated in this study in order to see whether the length of time spent learning English is a mitigating factor in assessing language anxiety. It is believed that the more years a student spends learning English, the less language anxiety they will experience since they are more familiar with the language learning situation. However, a later study by Rezazadeh & Travokoli (2009) has suggested that there is no meaningful relationship between test anxiety and the length of years spent studying the language.

2.4 Anxiety and Adult Learner

Adult learners are described as individuals who are more autonomous and able to develop their own knowledge and experiences in learning a second language. According to Krashen (1988), an adult learner is a formal thinker who is able to utilize formal operations such as conscious grammar, meta-awareness and general abstract rules of language. Lieb (1991) describes adults as “autonomous and self-directed learners; adults have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge; adults are goal-oriented; adults are relevancy-oriented; adults are practical and adults
need to be shown respect.” According to Faizah Abd Majid et al. (2007), adult learners are those who “enter or re-enter” schooling and have other special traits which distinguish them from other learners. However, there are some studies that differ with the above. As cited by Faizah Abd Majid et al. (2007), Rogers (2002:71) claimed that “autonomy is limited by what the social culture permits”. In addition, Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999) in their studies have ascertained that older students possess higher levels of anxiety than younger students and that older adults have the tendency to be reluctant to pronounce, translate, or write words in the target language about which they are uncertain. Lieberman (1984) has also previously affirmed that older students usually encounter more difficulty in the language structure and pronunciation. While Salthouse & Somberg (1982) found that older adults place greater emphasis on accuracy than do young adults.

2.5 Previous Research

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) were among the first researchers to devise the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) as a research instrument that focused particularly on feelings of anxiety experienced by foreign language learners in the classroom. Horwitz, et al. (1986) characterized language anxiety based on three factors, which are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and a general feeling of anxiety. Research conducted by Masahiko Goshi in 2005 found that there is a relationship between the students’ level of anxiety and the mean value was then correlated with the students’ perception on language learning. The FLCAS to measure the students’ level of anxiety and the mean value was then correlated with the students’ perception on language learning. Research conducted by Cubukcu in 2007 also examines the students’ level of anxiety and its relationship to second language learning besides investigating the methods to cope with anxiety among the respondents. It was found that there are a number of factors that cause anxiety namely the fear of making mistakes, the fear of losing face, the fear of failure and the fear of not being able to achieve a certain standard. Khan and Zafar (2010) studied the effects of provoked anxiety on performance of three different groups in three different stages of learning: pre-, while- and post-learning. Their results indicate that the highest anxiety rating for each experimental group was recorded directly after the use of the camera as a recording device in the classroom. This indicates that the students’ anxiety levels were aroused when they knew that they were being recorded by the camera whereby the anxiety level increased. Correspondingly, learners’ performance for the group of subjects who had most recently had anxiety aroused was found to be significantly impaired at each stage.

Besides that, there were also other studies on anxiety conducted within the setting of various educational institutions (Brantmeier, 2005; Hussein Elkhaifti, 2005; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002, Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001). These studies have variously found that language anxiety can arise from different English language skills activities such as writing tasks, oral presentations, listening activities, reading practices and grammar exercises. Some studies have also identified the sources of language anxiety like fear of failure, perceived proficiency, and competitiveness (Young, 1991; Bailey, 1983). Other than that, Sanchez-Herrero & Sanchez (1992) have found that there is a relationship between language anxiety and performance in which high levels of anxiety would negatively affect students’ performance.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study were adult learners in UTM SPACE, including learners at all levels of the community who were furthering their studies through part-time programs in UTM. 30% of the population totalling 132 of UTM SPACE students was selected randomly as participants for this study.
3.2 Instrument

The questionnaire was the main instrument used for this study. The questionnaire was adapted from Horwitz (1983) likert scale and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The questionnaire consists of 33 items in a 5-point Likert scale that range from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. Taking into account that this study was conducted based on learning English as a second language, the term ‘foreign language’ used in the original FLCAS used by Horwitz and Cope (1986) was replaced with ‘English Language’. Therefore, the FLCAS was changed to English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELCAS) in this study. Apart from that, the researcher considered including both a translation of the English language into Malay and the English version of items in order to maintain the validity. The instrument consisted of Part A and B. Part A was designed to obtain respondents’ demographic information including gender, age, and years of learning English. As for section B, 33 items were replicated from Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope’s (1986) FLCAS questionnaire. The thirty three items can be divided into three categories: 1) communication apprehension 2) fear of negative evaluation 3) general feeling of anxiety.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

For this study, the data was collected over two days in November 2011. Prior to the data collection, the students were informed on the study and their consent was obtained. After the students had understood what they were required to do, the ELCAS was distributed and the data was collected randomly among the UTM SPACE students.

The data was then analyzed quantitatively within duration of 2 weeks. The analysis aimed to focus on the different levels of anxiety a student may experience in the English class. The students’ levels of anxiety were divided into three levels: high, moderate and low. High level was determined from the mean values from 1.00 to 2.50. As for the moderate level of anxiety, the mean value was taken from the range of 2.51 to 3.50 while the low level, covered the mean of 3.51 to 5.00. The anxiety levels and the range of mean values are shown in Table 3.3 below:

| Anxiety level | Mean Value (Range) |
|---------------|--------------------|
| High          | From 1.00 to 2.50  |
| Moderate      | From 2.51 to 3.50  |
| Low           | From 3.51 to 5.00  |

The obtained data was analyzed using statistical analysis SPSS version 18.0 and presented in the form of descriptive statistics together with the percentages and mean. From the data, the language anxiety level experienced by the respondents and its relationship with their demographic background (gender, age and years of learning English) will be discussed. The researcher will also look at the most influential factor of language anxiety from the three factors that have been identified by Horwitz et.al (1986); communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and general feeling of anxiety. The answer to each item in the questionnaire using the five point likert scale had been converted to numerical values for statistical analysis and scoring was reversed for negatively worded items. The common measurement used in descriptive analysis was frequency and percentage as well as mean score and standard deviation. The variables which have correlation to each other will show a score value that relates to each other. Another inferential data analysis that was used in this research is Multiple Regression. This is to identify the dominant factor of anxiety in language learning.
4.0 Findings

This section presents the findings based on three objectives namely anxiety levels experienced by UTM adult students in learning English, the relationship between their demographic background (gender, age and years of learning English) with the levels of language anxiety and the dominant factors of language anxiety among the students.

4.1 Level of Anxiety according to Gender

Table 4.1.1 Level of Anxiety according to Gender

| Gender | Low | Moderate | High |
|--------|-----|----------|------|
| Male   | 0%  | 91.36%   | 8.64%|
| Female | 1.96% | 90.20% | 7.84% |

Table 4.1.2 Relationship between Language Anxiety and Gender

| Gender | Pearson Correlation | Sig. (2-tailed) | N  |
|--------|---------------------|-----------------|----|
|        |                     |                 | 132|
| Male   | 0.15                | 0.869           |    |
| Female | 0.15                | 0.869           |    |

Table 4.1.2 illustrates the correlation between Language Anxiety and Gender. The Pearson Correlation shows a weak negative correlation ($r = 0.15$). The Chi-Square test of independence showed that there is no evidence of a significant relationship between language anxiety level and gender since the null hypothesis was not rejected where $p=0.869$ ($p > 0.05$) as shown in the table below. Hence we cannot conclude that language anxiety is dependent on gender.

The findings seem to correspond to findings by Rosenfeld and Berko (1990) and Na (2007) on high school students’ English learning anxiety which reveals that there is no significant difference between male and female students although males score a slightly higher mean than females. This is probably because both genders actually respond in the same way to certain situations in the language classroom and no significant effect is detected that can be linked to differences in gender. Regardless of gender, the students are all conscious of their own performance and demonstrate similar signs of anxiety such as nervousness and panic in the language classroom (Mahfuzah Rafek, 2009). Liu and Huang (2011) noted that Chinese EFL learners have become increasingly aware of the importance of English and this leads to their higher proficiency, increased confidence and reduced anxiety in learning the language. This indicates that both males and females who are motivated in learning the second language will face less anxiety while those who are less or not motivated to learn the language tend to be more anxious in the classroom. This finding therefore reveals that difference in gender do not influence the level of anxiety and in fact most respondents, both males and females experienced moderate levels of anxiety during their second language learning.
4.3 Language Anxiety and Age

The findings in table 4.3.1 reveal that most of the respondents experienced a moderate level of anxiety in the language class. This indicates that in general they do not feel too anxious about learning the second language, though they are still anxious in certain situations.

4.4 Language Anxiety and Years of Learning English

The findings in table above show a weak negative correlation (r = 0.074). The Chi-Square test of independence indicated that there is no evidence of a significant relationship between language anxiety level and age since the null hypothesis was not rejected where p=0.399 (p > 0.05). Hence, we cannot conclude that language anxiety has any relation to age.

Despite their differences in age, adult learners are believed to be more matured in building positive values towards language learning. This is similar to Faizah Abd Majid et al’s (2007) observation that adult learners are different from conventional learners in that their roles as adult/workers would enhance their shaping of more positive societal values, behaviour and thinking. In this situation, the respondents demonstrated positive motivation and self-efficacy towards learning English as a second language and this has enabled them to avoid feeling anxious during the learning process.
The Pearson Correlation shows a low positive correlation ($r = 0.240$). The Chi-Square test of independence showed there is evidence to infer that there is a significant relationship between language anxiety level and the number of years a respondent has spent learning English since the null hypothesis was rejected where $p=0.006$ ($p < 0.05$). Hence, we can conclude that this is a factor which influences language anxiety. As the number of years learning English increases, the language anxiety level will decrease. Therefore, it can be concluded that the longer a student spends learning English the less language anxiety s/he will experienced since s/he would have gone through the language learning situation longer compared to those who have just learnt English for a few years.

4.5 The Dominant Factors of Language Anxiety

Based on the multiple regression analysis above, the significant ($p$) for the three dependent variables Communication Apprehension, Fear of Negative evaluation, and General Feeling of Anxiety is 0.000 which is smaller than alpha 0.05. This indicates that there is a significant relationship between the level of language anxiety and the three factors. In addition, this model does not have any multicollinearity problem since all the tolerance values are more than 0.20. For more evidence, we use VIF. VIF is a measure of how much the variance of an estimated regression coefficient increases if the dependent variables are correlated. If the VIF is >10 there is strong evidence that collinearity affects the regression coefficients and consequently they are poorly estimated. For this model, it is clear that the VIF values are all less than 10. Thus, no multicollinearity problem exists.

In order to determine the strongest or the dominant factor which influenced language anxiety, the Beta ($\beta$) value is studied. From the analysis, the factor which appears to have contributed the most to language anxiety is ‘General
Feeling of Anxiety’ in which its Beta is 0.429 followed by ‘Communication Apprehension’ (β = 0.359) and ‘Fear of Negative Evaluation’ (β = 0.301). Therefore, it is conclude that the dominant factor of language anxiety in English classroom among UTM adult students is General Feeling of Anxiety. This is because this variable has the highest Beta value which is 0.429.

One possible explanation for this finding is that students are very aware of their performance in English language and this causes students to be nervous, and worry about the consequences of failing the language test or exam. This is due to fact that most of them would compare their English result to the other classmates. Other than that, General feeling of anxiety is also related to feeling apprehension that influence the students to forget the things that actually know. This usually happens when they need to learn and comprehend the number of rules in English language. The grammar rules create overwhelming to the students especially when they have to learn speaking in English in which the rules makes them focus more on accuracy rather than fluency. The fluency aspect is also the reason when the language lecturer is a fluent speaker of English. Therefore, one would have problem of incomprehensible input in a second language class where one finds it difficult to understand the lesson in class. This provokes the students to feel more frustrated and worried when they cannot keep up with the others in class. As a result, they become more anxious and tend to forget the lesson that they know.

5.0 Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that the adult students who enrolled in the English class experience moderate level of anxiety. This is due to the fact that adult learners are more motivated and high in self-efficacy. They are able to solve their problems in learning in order to be more independent and able to control feelings of nervousness. Adult learners are also described as more matured, and have a more positive attitude towards language learning. Therefore, it can be concluded that motivation and self-confidence are important to enhance the second language learning environment. Besides this, the findings also indicate no significant difference of anxiety level with respect to gender and age. In other words, anxiety level is not affected by differences in gender and age. The findings indicate however that the number of years of learning English is a significant factor. Therefore, this study reveals that language anxiety is affected by the number of years the students spend learning English. Among the three factors of language anxiety, a general feeling of anxiety was the dominant cause of language anxiety among the respondents.

5.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of this study, there are several recommendations that can be suggested so that ESL teachers / lecturers can plan more positive learning environment to help their students reduce the level of anxiety while attending the second language class in UTM or other institutions.

Since motivation and self-confidence seems to be a factor that reduces anxiety, the English language lecturer or instructor should identify the effective methods that can enhance motivation and boost self-confidence among students. This is especially important for those who face difficulties in learning English due to feelings of anxiety. Methods and teaching-learning techniques are very crucial towards ensuring a comfortable environment for students in the language classroom. Although this study shows that most of the respondents experienced moderate levels of anxiety, there are a few students who experienced high levels of anxiety during the English class. Hence, the lecturers should be more sensitive towards students’ feelings while conducting evaluations whether formally or informally. This is because, learning a second language differs from learning the first language whereby most students face a lack of confidence and are insecure in the second language learning classroom. Therefore, the lecturers could carry out their evaluations in a more indirect manner so that the students would not feel anxious about learning English.
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