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ESL Students' Classroom Anxiety

Lawrence Jun Zhang

INTRODUCTION

Learning a second or foreign language in the classroom is not always an anxiety-free experience. Research has repeatedly showed that language learners are generally different in their demonstrations of anxiety (Horwitz, et al., 1986; Aida, 1994; Saito, et al., 1999). Learners' self-report about their worries and expectations in the process of learning the target language for academic success and other purposes has been a concern to language educators (Young, 1999). However, how learners experience this kind of anxiety in a study-abroad context, i.e., away from their home country, has been insufficiently explored. For this reason, this paper attempts to understand the degree of language learning anxiety of a group of PRC students studying ESL in Singapore.

ANXIETY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

A summary of different categories used in anxiety research is available by Hilleson (1996). Though definitions differ, it is generally agreed that language anxiety in second language learning is related to the psychological tension that a learner experiences in completing a learning task and is situation-specific (Horwitz, et al., 1986; Aida, 1994; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Young, 1999). Borrowing the term from psychology, Scovel (1978) defines anxiety in language learning as an emotional state of "apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object" (p. 134). However, Horwitz, et al.'s (1986) definition of anxiety as "a distinctive complex is more inclusive of affective factors in relation to this construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process". Similarly, Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) maintain that language learning anxiety is related to how an individual reacts in a nervous manner when speaking in the second language, and that the motivated individual is one who devotes considerable effort in activities to achieve his or her goal. Results of all the studies conducted thus far showed that learners' lack of proficiency in the target language is a major contributor to their anxiety and individual differences are salient features of language anxiety (Horwitz, et al., 1986; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Aida, 1994; Saito, et al., 1999).

A contributing factor to learners' success or failure to master second/foreign language is the manner that learners orchestrate their worries, apprehension, and even dread when faced with a certain language task (Bailey, 1983). This anxiety can be either a strong motivational variable which can stimulate learners, or a debilitating factor, which could hinder the learner from achieving the expected goals (Chastain, 1975; Scovel, 1978; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Young, 1999). In Scovel's words:

Facilitating anxiety motivates the learner to "fight" the learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approach behaviour. Debilitating anxiety, in contrast, motivates the learner to "flee" the new learning task; it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behaviour (Scovel, 1978, p. 139).

In examining adult English-speaking students' diaries on how they learn a foreign language, Cohen and Norst (1989) found that students have expressed their fears and anxiety when they are put in situations where they have to perform before their peers and the teacher. These fears and anxiety are reflected not only through the use of such words as "embarrassment", "trauma", "unnerving", "frightening", "resentment", "frustration" and so on, but also through their physical responses. They tend to blush; their hands are likely to tremble; their hearts tend to pound heavily and they may experience headaches in such conditions. Similarly, using learner diaries, Hilleson (1996) investigated how students experienced difficulties in academic study that arose due to language problems. He found that the participants of his study not only demonstrated anxiety in speaking and listening, but also in reading and writing. Saito, et al. (1999) investigated second language learners' general language and reading anxiety and suggested that students' reading anxiety is not as great as their general language anxiety. Similar findings were also found in Zhang's (2000) study of reading anxiety of a group of PRC students learning ESL as a university admission requirement in Singapore. Zhang reported that the biggest source of reading anxiety was the students' lack of sufficient vocabulary. Research on how anxiety affects their language learning process in a study-abroad context is lacking (Freed, 1995). Therefore, this study explores: (1) whether PRC students learning ESL experience language learning anxiety in a study-abroad context, i.e., in a society like Singapore with varied cultures; and (2) whether there are gender differences between female and male students in their perceptions of language learning anxiety.

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Participants and Method

One hundred and forty-five PRC ESL students participated in this study. The participants comprised of students who had completed their second year in senior middle school (SM2, $N=75$) and students who had completed their third year in senior middle school (SM3, $N=70$). These students were randomly selected from a total of about 410 cohort of students who took up a six-month compulsory English communication skills programme at two tertiary institutions in Singapore. Fifty-six of them (38.6%) were females and eighty-nine (61.4%) were males. On the average, all these PRC students had five to six years of EFL learning experience in their homeland but lack sufficient exposure to English before they came to Singapore. Their average age was about 18 years and the age difference between the SM2 and SM3 students was less than one year.

Instrument and Its Reliability

The instrument used in this study consists of 33 items on the Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) to show the degree of their agreement to each statement. This instrument was adapted from Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), as reported in Horwitz, et al. (1986) and Saito et al. (1999), which has a consistency coefficient of .94 (Cronbach *alpha*, $N=383$). An acceptable reliability of FLCAS is also reported elsewhere, for example, Aida (1994) reports a test-retest reliability of this instrument in two studies, both of which are acceptable ($N=108$, $r=.83$, $p<.01$; $N=54$, $r=.80$, $p<.01$ respectively).

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The survey instrument was administered to each class respectively by the researcher and their class monitors in the eighth week of their study. The survey was completed within 10 minutes. For students studying in the other university where the researcher did not teach, data were collected with the assistance of two students in their hostels. The data were analysed to obtain descriptive and inferential statistics, the results of which are reported below.

RESULTS

Students' perceptions of their anxiety in learning ESL in a study-abroad context is shown in Table 1. Speaking remains the greatest challenge

for them (item 1, $M=2.97$, $SD=1.12$; item 9, $M=2.92$, $SD=1.04$; item 24, $M=2.95$, $SD=.87$). The students seemed to worry a lot about the consequences of their ESL results (item 10, $M=2.87$, $SD=.96$). Tests are another source of their anxiety (item 8, $M=3.12$, $SD=.91$). Answering teachers' questions in the classroom tends to contribute to students' levels of anxiety (item 33, $M=2.88$, $SD=1.02$). However, speaking with native speakers is not a major source of students' anxiety (item 14, $M=2.85$, $SD=1.03$). Instead, they reported that they would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English (item 32, $M=2.87$, $SD=.97$). Generally, they would be upset if they are unable to understand the teachers' corrections (item 15, $M=2.88$, $SD=.98$).

The total means and standard deviations of the FLCAS with this group of participants are $M=103.4$ and $SD=21.54$ respectively. This compares relatively well with the results reported in Saito et al. (1999); that is, students' perception of anxiety on the scale is on the average a little above 3 (3.14) on each of the 33 items on the five-point Likert scale. The participants' levels of reading anxiety in the study by Saito et al. (1999) are not as high as those on the FLCAS ($M=95.2$, $SD=21.5$). The total means and SD on the FLCAS also compare well with what is reported elsewhere on these students' reading anxiety. For example, Zhang (2000) reported that his PRC students' reading anxiety showed a total mean of $M=72.1$, $SD=23.6$, which meant that they also showed an average of slightly above 3 (3.13) and $SD=1.02$ on the 5-point Likert scale. This infers that the language anxiety in this group of ESL learners not only reflected their reading skills but also their general language learning.

Table 1. ESL Students' Perception of Anxiety on FLCAS

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale Items	Mean (M)	Std Deviation (SD)
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English.	2.87	1.12
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in language classes.	2.73	.96
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in English class.	3.68	.94
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.	3.10	1.01
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English classes.	2.89	1.05

6.	During English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	3.20	.97
7.	I keep thinking that the other students are better in English than I am.	3.00	1.07
8.	I am usually at ease during tests in my English class.	3.12	.91
9.	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English in class.	2.92	1.04
10.	I worry about the consequences of failing English.	2.87	.96
11.	I don't understand why some people get so upset over English class.	3.01	.90
12.	In English class, I can get so nervous that I forget things I know.	3.23	.96
13.	I am too embarrassed to volunteer answers in my English class.	3.17	1.06
14.	I am not nervous when conversing with the locals.	2.85	1.03
15.	I get upset when I don't understand the teacher's corrections.	2.88	.98
16.	Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious/nervous about it.	3.43	1.04
17.	I often do not feel like attending English class.	3.77	.91
18.	I feel confident when I speak in my English class.	2.99	.86
19.	I am afraid that of being corrected by my English teacher.	3.53	.90
20.	I feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in my class.	3.24	1.02
21.	The more I study for an English test, the more confused I get.	3.44	.92
22.	I don't feel pressurised to prepare well for English class.	3.03	.93
23.	I always feel the other students speak better English than I do.	3.06	1.01
24.	I feel very self-conscious when I use English in front of other students.	2.95	.87
25.	I worry about not being able to catch up.	3.19	1.01
26.	I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in the other classes.	3.41	.98
27.	I get nervous and confused when I speak in my English class.	3.22	.99
28.	When I am on my way to language class, I feel sure and relaxed.	2.87	.92

29. I get nervous when I don't understand what the English teacher says.	3.14	1.08
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English.	3.23	.86
31. I am afraid the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	3.64	.86
32. I usually feel comfortable with local English speakers.	2.87	.97
33. I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared.	2.88	1.02

To answer Research Question 2, *t*-tests were performed. Generally, results showed that male students are significantly different from female students ($p < .05$) in their perceptions of anxiety on 12 of the 33 items. As reported in Table 2, males have stronger feelings of language anxiety than females. Informal interviews with the students also revealed that the higher anxiety of the males came from peer pressure, change of learning environment and their perceived challenges of majoring in engineering fields where their actual ability in using the language for academic success were necessary. In addition, they were also worried about taking the university admission test — the English Qualifying Test administered by the two local universities.

DISCUSSION

The study aims to understand students' language learning difficulties in studying language anxiety. Two important findings emerged from this study. Firstly, on the average, both groups of PRC students experience language anxiety in language learning because of the change in learning environment. They had assumed that Singapore's socio-cultural context would be identical with China's but discovered that the two were very different. Secondly, male students have stronger feelings of language anxiety than their female counterparts.

The first finding is in line with Saito, et al.'s (1999) report on their study of foreign language learners in the United States. Their findings suggest that the degree of anxiety reflected in the second language learners' learning processes is a strong indicator of the learners' perception of their intrinsic and internal, as well as their external, orchestration of their progress. Majority of the PRC students had difficulties speaking and writing in English to express themselves. Unexpectedly however, they did not seem to experience anxiety when conversing with the locals. This suggests that they perceive Singapore

Table 2

Items in the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)	Means Std Deviations				<i>T-value</i>	P	<i>Comment</i>
	(8)	(SD)	F	M			
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in language classes.	2.48	287	.81	.98	2.37*	.019	M>F
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in English class.	3.96	3.47	.93	.86	3.07*	.003	M>F
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English classes.	2.48	3.03	.87	1.04	3.07*	.003	M>F
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my English class.	2.88	3.22	.87	.92	2.06*	.041	M>F
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	3.46	3.03	1.01	1.10	2.26*	.026	M>F
23. I always feel the other students speak better than I do.	3.36	2.92	.78	1.11	2.43*	.016	M>F
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.	3.50	3.00	.84	1.07	2.79*	.006	M>F
28. When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	2.56	3.14	.88	.90	3.58*	.000	M>F
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.	3.22	3.19	1.08	1.06	2.22*	.028	M>F
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English.	3.42	3.08	.86	.86	2.22*	.028	M>F
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	4.00	3.49	.64	.92	3.41*	.001	M>F
32. I would feel comfortable with local English speakers.	2.64	3.01	.94	.97	2.15*	.033	M>F

F = Female; M = Male; *: significant at the level of $p < .05$; M>F = males have stronger feelings of anxiety than females

as a multi-ethnic society in which English is the lingua franca for people of different ethnic backgrounds and that Singaporeans are not real “native” English speakers. It may also suggest that they perceive the requirements for using local varieties of English less challenging than using native British or American variety. The local varieties of English consisted of ‘acrolect’, ‘mesolect’ and ‘basilect’ (Platt & Weber, 1980). The basilect variety of English that they hear everyday in Singapore might have given them some confidence in themselves and hence, they did not anticipate strong anxiety speaking with local English speakers. Teacher diversity also helped to relieve language-learning anxiety. Teachers who are familiar with the students’ backgrounds and needs in the intensive English programme, might have helped them familiarise themselves with the language learning environment and reduce their language anxiety studying in Singapore.

The study also reveals that the PRC male students are more prone to anxiety than their female counterparts. It is possible that males are more outspoken than females and are more likely to reveal their anxiety related to language learning difficulties as compared to the females who are more introverted in general. Another possible explanation is that the female students by and large demonstrate a higher level of speaking proficiency in their class performance. This was noted by the teachers who might have given male students the impression that they are not as good as their female counterparts in learning English. This pressure increases the anxiety levels of the male students but it might also have provided the stimulus for them to work harder in their language learning processes (Chastain, 1975).

While it is natural that PRC students experienced general language anxiety in speaking, the intensive nature of the English communication skills programme that they attended increases the anxiety. Attending the programme is one of the admission requirements to the local universities in Singapore. The intensive nature of ESL learning could be a strong reason why the students feared attending their English classes. During the English class, the male PRC students are generally more reticent than their female counterparts. This could be due to their relatively poorer speaking proficiency. Outside the class, female students are also more comfortable than male students when they converse with local English speakers. This again suggests that female students perceive that they are more proficient in English, a view that increases self-confidence and reduces anxiety levels.

Findings from this study lend support to several studies on language anxiety (Cohen & Norst, 1989; Horwitz, et al., 1986; Saito, et al., 1999). When students’ levels of proficiency increase, their levels of

anxiety decrease, that is, they have more confidence in themselves in using that particular language. Although results of this study cannot fully explain the differences in males' and females' perceptions of language anxiety, it can be suggested, however, that females' stronger tendency to socialise and their assessment of their current English proficiency levels might have reduced language anxiety. From my interaction with the students inside and outside the classroom, I found that females are more interested in successfully assimilating into the larger social context, that is, a cultural context seemingly identical to but intrinsically diversified and different from that in their home country. This socialisation process might also have influenced the female students' choices in their daily lives and in their studies.

Nevertheless, the paradoxical question arises as to whether ESL learners are in need of a certain level of anxiety in language learning. PRC students in this study experienced language anxiety in different ways. However, anxiety is bi-directional, that is, the concept can be divided into "facilitating and debilitating anxiety" (Scovel, 1978; Chastain, 1975). The former "motivates the learner to fight the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for appropriate behaviour. Debilitating anxiety, in contrast, motivates the learner to flee the new learning task" (Scovel, 1978, p. 139). In other words, if the learners' level of anxiety is moderate, then anxiety could be a motivating factor. On the other hand, when learners have low anxiety, it could mean that the language learning task might be too easy or lacks challenge, resulting in the learners not taking serious responsibility. As a result, their progress in language learning might not be as rapid as assumed. In sum, data from this study suggest that PRC ESL students generally have a little higher level of language anxiety than necessary, which, if not carefully considered, could have a negative effect on their successful learning of the language.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

As suggested by this and other studies mentioned above, if students studying a foreign language in their home country are faced with language anxieties, then the severity of the problems faced by overseas ESL students would be even greater. To help these students obtain an adequate grasp of English for use in study and work, we must consider the factors that might contribute to their language anxiety and provide the help that they need to facilitate them in acquiring proficiency.

For the PRC students in Singapore, the following recommendations could assist them in language learning. The students should try to adapt

to a new way of life and regard the new social context as a conducive community for language learning so that they can improve their overall English proficiency, in particular, their spoken English. Making friends with local students on university campus would assist them to improve not only their oral English skills but also L2 proficiency. This is one way they could overcome anxiety in learning the language. Inside the language classroom, teacher diversity might help ESL learners reduce unnecessary anxiety. At the administrative level, it might be pertinent to assign these classes to teachers who are familiar with the students' backgrounds and culture so that the learners develop an ambience of familiarity and 'home-feeling'. Teachers could also provide encouragement to help the students reduce anxiety in classroom settings. More cooperative learning and assessment activities such as self-evaluation and peer-evaluation rather than competitive activities might be relevant in these classroom settings.

Finally, to reduce language learning anxiety, explicit instruction on certain study and self-management skills such as advance organisers and prioritising daily learning tasks, and strategies specifically conducive to language learning gains, could be given. This means that ESL teachers need to design and plan their lessons in such a manner that language learning is non-threatening. Language learning strategies that focus on a learner-centred environment can enhance students' language skills (Zhang, 2000). Teacher-student interaction and peer-conferencing are two of the many ways to facilitate effective instruction. These activities would give the students more confidence and hence reduce their anxieties in the process of learning the language. This is particularly essential for students who have a stronger locus of control. Their successes can also be enhanced by teachers' conscientious efforts to change classroom activities with reference to students' affective welfare in mind (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). This is a great challenge for classroom teachers.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify students' difficulties in learning ESL in relation to the anxiety construct. Results showed that most of the PRC students who participated in the study had language anxiety and that the perceptions of anxiety by males and females differed. Although financial and administrative constraints made the establishment of a correlation between students' levels of anxiety and their learning achievement impossible, findings from this study suggest that the students' affective changes should be considered in the selection of teaching strategies to assist progress in language acquisition. This will

reduce the students fear of the language. Further studies could explore the causal attributes of PRC ESL learners and learning styles as possible contributors to their anxiety in language learning. Future research could also study the affective experiences of individuals in language learning using methods such as diaries, think-aloud and more comprehensive interviews because the questionnaire in this study did not cater for individual differences in L2 learners' perception of language learning anxieties.

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