

Dealing with Anxiety in Foreign Language Learning Classroom

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Abstract—Anxiety is a major factor that handicap learners' cognition in learning. Learners in foreign language learning (FL) suffer from anxiety due to various reasons. Studies found that higher level of anxiety affects the learning process and lowers down learning motivation. In light of research literature, this paper aims at finding out the most serious reasons of FL learning anxiety and its effects on learners' FL learning process. The study draws on the existing scholarship in the theorizing for anxiety in FL learning settings. The study followed the qualitative method of research. The findings reveal that anxiety negatively affects the learning and achievements of students. This study also suggests effective techniques to help learners get rid of FL learning anxiety in classroom situation.

Index Terms— anxiety, motivation, foreign language

I. INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is as old as human being himself due to life's demand and pressures at least to fulfill his primary needs. It can be productive if it does not exceed certain limits, but to go beyond the positive lines, it becomes destructive. In the context of education students have anxiety in the different stages of his studies. As this study concerned, it tackles the issue of the anxiety in foreign language learning classroom. Anxiety in general may be termed as a psychological or physiological state resulting from physical, emotional, behavioral and cognitive factors. Hilgard, Atkinson and Atkinson (1983) define it as "a psychological construct, commonly described by psychologists as a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object". When learning a foreign or second language is concerned, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986 & 1991) viewed it as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to FL classroom learning. It is the worry and arousal of negative emotional reaction during second language learning (MacIntyre, 1999 as cited in Lucas, Miraflores and Go, 2011).

Horwitz (2001) classifies anxiety into three distinct categories: trait anxiety, state anxiety and situation-specific anxiety. FL anxiety is 'situation-specific' (MacIntyre, 1998) and it is negatively correlated to FL learning achievement (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994; Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). Anxiety, one of the major affective factors, does not function independently, rather it functions interdependently. It is related to learners' other personality traits too, for example introvert learners are found having more anxiety issues than extrovert ones (Brown, Robson & Rosenkjar, 2001). Gardner in his socio-educational model correlates anxiety with attitude and motivation paradigm, whereas Chao (2003) finds significant correlation between emotional intelligence and FL anxiety. Learners with anxiety fail to demonstrate their FL linguistic competence properly. (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). Dorney (2005) mentions anxiety as one of the vital factors that shape learners' success in mastering an FL.

Anxiety may be understood through some external symptoms such as hesitation, verbal staggering, perspiration, increased heartbeat, confusion, tension, inconsistent speech, and so on. In some cases, they seem to hesitate, shake, choke and to some extent lose psychological and physical control. Anxiety leads to participatory inhibition. In FL classroom, anxiety-stricken students lose confidence and isolate them from the participating students. Liu and Jackson (2008) found significant correlation between students FL anxiety and their unwillingness to communicate.

Thus Anxiety is understood as suffering or distress to the mind caused by fear of danger that threatens the person. General anxiety is an extreme stress about day-to-day matters. It is more imaginative and it dominates the way we think about work, study, people, and daily activities in the different aspects of life. As foreign language anxiety is concerned, different scholars look at it from different perspective. It has become of great significance to solve the problems that hinder the achievement of the students in learning a foreign language especially where no environment for practicing the language. The interest in overcoming foreign language anxiety experienced by learners is urgent and a must as a scarce literature and studies are available on such topic. It is a real problem that deters our efforts as teachers of English language teaching the language in a foreign language setting. Therefore, a study as such is of a great interest.

II. RATIONALE

The main objective of this study was to find out if EFL learners afraid and worried while learning FL in the classroom and other different education settings. It is an attempt to address the causes and consequences of such feeling as observed in the behavior of students while responding to questions, participating in the classroom activities or answering exam. It means that the study is trying to explore the reasons behind the different types of negative feelings that characterize the behavior of students with distress in FL learning classroom. The other significant objective of this study was to give more importance to the to the most common causes of FL learning anxiety ranging from test anxiety to strict classroom environment, through the cultural background, to the interference of the mother tongue, fear of negative evaluation, perfectionist tendency, learners' stylistic preferences, personality traits and ending with learners' linguistic capacity. The study is to provide the teachers as well as the learners with feedback about how to deal with anxiety in FL learning classroom in different situation. The findings of this study will help those interested in FL teaching and learning to find out the proper treatment for the problems addressed in this study. The important objective of this study was to find the most common factors beyond anxiety of learners in FR classroom and the extent these factors play in hindering the roles of learners, teachers, parents, and educators. This study followed the qualitative research methods, the teacher's reflexive experience, with the inclusion of the findings of the existing scholarship. The study is an attempt to contribute to the understanding of the causes of the anxiety of learners in FL classroom and hereby to address the possible solutions for such a disappointing educational problem taking in consideration how this anxiety affect the achievement of students and hinder the efforts of teachers from realizing the educational goals.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is conducted to answer two main questions: What are the most common factors that causes of anxiety for learners in foreign language classroom? How to deal with the factors that cause anxiety in FL classroom and overcome their consequences?

IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The problem of anxiety of learners in classroom has been addressed largely by researches as it affects the overall outcomes of education and likewise for learners of a foreign language that was a need to investigate the issue of anxiety. The need for such a study is an increasing demand for learners, teachers, parents and educators as well. Learning a foreign language has become a demand in many countries all over the world and this increasing interest is faced by challenges of which anxiety in classroom is the most dominant question. The problem anxiety of learners in a FL classroom can be due to many factors as previous studies concluded such as test anxiety, strict classroom environment, cultural background, interference of the mother tongue, fear of negative evaluation, perfectionist tendency, learners' stylistic preferences, personality traits and learners' linguistic capacity. This study gets its importance from addressing these issues and gives the solutions on how to reduce and/or overcome the negative impact of the factors that causes anxiety for learners of FL in the classroom. The result of this study will contribute into how to make the classroom an educational environment for foreign language learners without anxiety. More importantly, this study introduces Pedagogical implications regarding classroom environment and giving feedback and thus helping the teachers and learners equally have less distressed classroom environment.

V. CAUSES OF FL ANXIETY

To address the first question of the study it has been found that there are several major factors that commonly cause anxiety in foreign language learning classroom. FL anxiety is a very crucial issue that has to be taken seriously in order to facilitate FL learning. Undoubtedly it is a complex mental phenomenon and no specific reason can be referred to this phenomenon as it stems from multiple interrelated issues. In this paper we are going to mention some most common causes of FL learning anxiety.

Test anxiety: Test anxiety is one of the major problems faced by learners in general and learners of foreign languages in particular. This problem comes to the surface ant time during the academic year whenever a teacher announces for an evaluation or test. It is one of the most common and serious anxiety types in language learning especially in academic context relating to the fear of failing a test. Several studies asserted the negative effects of anxiety on students in the exam settings which make them feel worried, afraid and confused while responding to the exam questions. Students sometimes set unrealistic goal and thus add more pressure to their overall academic stress (Kralova and Petrova, 2017). Most of the learners participating in different FL anxiety studies reported to suffer much from anxiety when they are to take a formal test or put into any formal evaluative situation. According to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), FL anxiety reaches its highest degree in a test context. They are tensed about making mistakes in front of their classmates, getting corrected by the teacher in front of others, and getting their performance published openly.

Strict classroom environment: Strict formal classroom environment is a significant reason of anxiety (Hashemi, 2011) which leaves debilitating effect on learners' motivation and leads to further anxiety. If the teacher is too judgmental, and harsh, it might lead to learning anxiety in FL classroom (Samimy, 1994; & Aida, 1994, as cited in Lucas, Miraflores and Go, 2011). Instead of harsh and non-cooperative teacher's approach, students expect some

positive and supportive response and feedback from the teachers. Palacios (1998) further states that teachers' unsupportive attitude, lack of sympathy and time for individual attention makes it increasingly difficult for learners to cope with the FL classroom situations which leads to higher degree of FL learning anxiety. Young (1994) claims that the teachers' unnatural methods of error correction, interaction and other classroom procedural issues might arouse learners' FL anxiety.

Cultural background: Learners' socio-cultural background is said to impact in creating anxiety when found widely distant from target language socio-cultural background. Horwitz (2001) emphasized that the cultural differences should be kept in mind during the classroom practice as it may potentially lead to learners' anxiety. For example, Ohata (2005) investigated FL anxiety in Japanese context and revealed that Japanese cultural norms or expectations influence the emotional difficulties and English learning anxiety of Japanese learners. In expressing ideas, Japanese are hesitant, not assertive; and this culturally developed tendency seems to cause anxiety in their communication with their fellow learners and others. A similar case can be referred to Saudi Arabian context as Mohamed and Omer (2000) mentions the Arabs' implicit way of communication, in which the speakers expect others to understand the hidden message of their speech. This non-expressive, implicit and introvert style may pave the way to communication apprehension which is characterized by the fear and anxiety in maintaining communication with others.

First language interference: In monolingual FL context where FL has no real life use and necessity, learners are supposed to have higher degree of FL anxiety. In such context classroom is the only place where the learners have opportunity to practice FL, but ironically they show little enthusiasm in grabbing that limited opportunity; rather they prefer to continue in their L1. They find it stressful communicating in FL owing to its no practical out of class use. For example in Saudi Arabia, though the importance of English as an FL is on the rise, it has very little practice in social contexts.

Fear of negative evaluation: Learning an FL is a "profoundly unsettling psychological proposition" (Guiora, 1983: 8) and evaluation intensifies it. Fear of negative evaluation, let it be by their fellow learning peers or by the instructors, is one of the major anxiety-causing factors. Worde (2003) defined it as learners' anticipation of being judged negatively in any situation. Language classroom is always anxiety-causing for the students because it involves constant competition and regular evaluation of learners' competence and performance. They are scared of being negatively judged by their peers and teachers and so, they prefer to avoid evaluative situations (Lucas, Miraflores and Go, 2011), and also in classroom situations they are highly disinclined in responding to evaluative questions, participating in discussion or making an oral presentation and rather remain silent (Liu, 2006).

Perfectionist tendency: Perfectionist tendency from both teachers' and students' sides lead to learning anxiety. Many classroom situations demand perfect response from the learners and create learners' anxiety (Hashemi, 2011). Apart from demanding perfect classroom responses, assignments, tight schedules, obligations to meet certain course requirements, producing overall whole class better test score are the other factors that pressurize a teacher, and this pressure automatically passes to the learners. On the other hand, students' concentrating on absolute accuracy in order to achieve outstanding test scores stresses themselves and suffer from anxiety. **Learners' stylistic preferences:** It is a covert truth that a match between learners' learning style and teachers' teaching style should go hand in hand for better output in FL classroom situations. Teachers' sensitivity of the learners' learning styles and difficulties is important, and lack of such sensitivity may cause FL anxiety. Oxford (1999) terms such mismatch of learners' learning styles and teachers' teaching style as 'style wars', and anticipates that this 'style wars' may lead to a rise in FL learners' anxiety.

Personality traits: Personality traits such as being extrovert or introvert play significant role in FL anxiety. This extrovert-introvert dichotomy has grabbed the attention of the experts in the area of psycholinguistics. Extroverts by default like to talk, socialize and take risk. They care little about others' criticism and judgment. Introverts on the other hand avoid participating in discussion, socialization, and in fact, they prefer to isolate themselves from others. Studies such as Brown, Robson & Rosenkjar (2001) discloses that introverts suffer more from FL anxiety compared to extroverts.

Learners' linguistic capacity: Though learners' FL anxiety may be analyzed in terms of individual language skills such as reading, writing (Saito et al., 1999) and listening (Elkhafafi, 2005) skills, it is associated to speaking skills to the largest extent (Zheng, 2008). Price (1991) mentions that a remarkable number of participants in his study considered oral presentation to be most anxiety provoking. Learners with better language skills are found proactive and prompt in classroom activities participation, but on the other hand low-skilled ones tend to avoid and add to their anxiety.

VI. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The finding and results of the study address the second question on how to deal with the anxiety in foreign language learning classroom. The answer to this question come out with Pedagogical implications such as:

Testing: Testing is a very common but important academic affair. In FL classes, formal test or evaluation is the most widely practiced form of assessment. As mentioned earlier in this paper that most of the learners feel anxious about test; teachers may prepare learners for test by giving them academic and mental support. They can present test as a simple but necessary curricular activity for the learners. Teachers can convince the learners that the test score is important, but it is not everything, and so the learners better concentrate on learning as much as possible without worrying about test. Instead of one or two major tests, there could be some shorter versions of tests as classroom activity and less formal

quizzes. In some cases, alternative assessment can be used. Moreover, it should not be always emphasized by the teachers, parents and educators that the tests and passing them is closely associated with the success or failure of the future life of the learner because this increases their fear and anxiety. It is better to inform them that test is only a measurement tool to check the extent of achieving the course objectives.

Classroom environment: There must be a relaxing, comfortable and motivating environment in the class, and the teachers have to take the main responsibility in doing so. They have to ensure a safe and welcoming classroom (Zheng, 2008). There may be a set of rules in the classroom, and students may have some roles in determining the classroom rules. Teachers' considerate and empathetic behaviors, easy but effective ways of presentation, interesting and engaging activities etc. can play a vital role in relieving learners' anxiety. Classroom demands such as everyday tasks, assignments, quizzes may be decided based on the learners' actual capacity. Instead of individual work and presentation, there could be group work and group presentation, because working in group relieves individual stress and the individuals start having a being-worthy feeling which in the long run helps learners get rid of anxiety and makes them confident. Moreover, working in a group, learners can discover their hidden capabilities, and develop mutual respect for each other.

Giving feedback: Giving feedback is an everyday teacher's task and the nature of feedback can facilitate or debilitate learners' motivation and performance. It can be anxiety-inducing or anxiety-reducing. It is suggested that the teachers' feedback should always be positive and encouraging. While correcting errors, teachers may correct only those mistakes that the learners will understand and can avoid in their next attempt. Ensure that making mistakes is a part of the learning process and in no ways can it be an indicator of failure (Elkhafaifi, 2005). Teachers should motivate the learners not to humiliate their classmates for their mistakes, because making mistakes is a common human tendency. It can be good idea to give feedback as a group not individuals, and in case individual feedback is required, teachers can give individual feedback during their counseling hours so that students do not have the fear of losing face in front of others. Apart from teachers, institutional policy and framework are required to be flexible and inspiring. Overload of assignments, extracurricular projects, higher expectations etc. are expected to be within the pleasant limit of the learners. Parental cooperation can be planned and materialized to deal with learners' anxiety in general and FL anxiety in specific. It is more required here in FL classroom to have a type of integration and cooperation between teachers, parents, and education officials where an appropriate and encouraging educational environment can be created.

VII. CONCLUSION

Recently teachers of foreign languages and educators showed more interest in studying the issue of anxiety as the teaching of foreign languages is enjoying more attention in an era of globalization. The study of such a problem is an urgent demand for the teachers to enable them to overcome the anxiety of learners in the classroom. The results of this study can provide teachers and learners with basic solution through the diagnosis of the problem and finding out the proper solutions that address the issue more closely and clearly. This study showed that FL anxiety is a constant issue in the arena of language learning and teaching which flows from multiple factors and the factors are interrelated to each other. The results of this study revealed the causes beyond classroom anxiety in foreign language classes and highlighted the most common factors that can result in negative consequences which affect the learning process. The learners, teachers, parents and educators complain about such situation and sought a great demand for what hinder their efforts in achieving the required outcome of teaching FL. The factors are both external and internal in nature, so it is not possible to define and understand in simple linear way. Moreover, learners for their individual difference factors, suffer a varied nature and degree of it. To help learners come out of this dismay. Teachers have to play the major role. Understanding the learners, their affective factors, preferences, socio-cultural background and motivation can help teachers to adopt effective strategies, create learning and learners centered friendly environment. To sum up we recommend large scale primary researches in different FL contexts in order to better understand FL anxiety and help learners to get rid of it. Recommendations of this study should help the teachers of FL create a supportive, encouraging, and thriving teaching environment. This study just drew the attention to the problem, and there still much to be investigated about anxiety in FL classroom and therefore future studies in this area are required particularly studies of quantitative nature.

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