



Analysing Environmental And Psychological Factors Of Foreign Language Anxiety In Uzbek Higher Educational Context

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the environmental and psychological factors that contribute to foreign language anxiety among undergraduate EFL learners in the Uzbek higher educational context. Foreign language anxiety is considered a serious affective barrier that can limit students' classroom participation, oral performance, self-confidence, and overall language development. Using a qualitative research design, the study is based on a semi-structured interview with an undergraduate student who had experienced anxiety while learning and using English at university. The interview data were analysed through thematic analysis in order to identify recurring patterns related to the causes of anxiety. The findings reveal that foreign language anxiety is shaped by both learner-related and classroom-related factors. The main psychological factors include fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, and comparison with more proficient classmates. Environmental factors include repeated negative classroom experiences, strict teacher behaviour, and harsh or excessive correction of students' errors. The study suggests that teachers play an important role in either reducing or increasing learners' anxiety. Therefore, creating a supportive, respectful, and low-anxiety classroom environment is essential for encouraging students to communicate more freely in English. Although the study is limited to one participant, it provides useful insights into how foreign language anxiety may develop in Uzbek higher education and offers pedagogical implications for EFL teachers.

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Introduction

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been acknowledged as a significant barrier to language learning and proficiency development, particularly in educational contexts (Horwitz et al., 1986). FLA includes a variety of affective and emotional responses that language learners encounter, such as feelings of apprehension, fear, and nervousness in language learning situations. Since there are so many questions about language anxiety that need to be investigated and answered, and there are many students who experience discomfort and annoyance because of it, research on FLA is one of the significant areas which should not be ignored. However, despite this, there are very few studies conducted on factors causing FLA among undergraduate students in higher educational settings in Uzbekistan. This highlights the critical importance of conducting such studies in this context. Therefore, the purpose of the current research paper is to identify the environmental and psychological factors that are likely to cause FLA in linguistic higher education students. Through a semi-structured interview with a language learner who has experienced FLA during her studies, this research seeks to uncover the underlying causes of FLA.

Literature Review

The concept of foreign language anxiety (FLA)

In the academic literature, considered as one of the factors that negatively impact the language learning process, FLA is defined by several researchers. According to Horwitz et al. (1986, 128), who were the first to conceive FLA as situation-specific anxiety, it is “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process”. Their study shows that learners who are good at other subjects may experience anxiety while learning a foreign language. For Gardner and MacIntyre (1993, 5), language anxiety is an apprehension-related phenomenon and they define it as “the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient”. Students who experience anxiety are unlikely to be eager to share any personal information (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993) and find it challenging to demonstrate their acquired knowledge (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). In this case, the learner may undergo clinical signs such as sweating and rapid heartbeat (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Alpert and Haber (1960) classify language anxiety into debilitating and facilitating. While debilitating anxiety has a detrimental effect on learning and performance, facilitating anxiety has certain advantages for students to perform effectively and keeps students focused on the language (Ehrman, 1996). However, even though certain studies observed that FLA facilitates the language learning process, there is not sufficient proof to support this claim and most studies obtained a negative correlation between language anxiety and achievement (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993). According to Aida (1994), the most anxiety-provoking situation is when students are expected to speak in class. Similarly, the fact that oral production tasks elicit feelings of anxiety is noted by Horwitz (2001).

Components of FLA

Three main components of FLA are identified by Horwitz et al. (1986): communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension, as defined by Horwitz et al. (1986, 127), is “a type of shyness characterized by fear or anxiety about communicating with people”. It encompasses worries about making mistakes or experiencing embarrassment during speaking and participating in language classes. The study conducted by Al-Saraj (2014) among female English language learners in Saudi Arabia reported that being highly anxiety-provoking, delivering presentations in the classroom resulted in communication apprehension.

Test anxiety refers to the apprehension and nervousness experienced specifically in assessment situations, such as exams. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), some students set unattainable goals and consider it as a failure when they do less than a perfect test performance. They also state that test-anxious students may experience both test and communication anxiety in oral assessments.

The third component, which is fear of negative evaluation involves the avoidance or fear of being negatively judged or evaluated by others (Horwitz et al. 1986). Learners may worry about being perceived as incompetent, unintelligent, or inferior due to their language performance, leading to feelings of insecurity and self-doubt. Horwitz et al. (1986) also emphasize that this component resembles test anxiety, but it may occur in any social evaluative situation, not only in test or exam processes.

FLA at three stages of language learning

Anxiety can emerge at different phases of language learning and influence a learner's capacity to acquire, process, and produce language. Understanding the various ways anxiety affects language acquisition stages like input, processing and output, offers insight into its complex consequences. Anxiety during the input stage of language learning can impair comprehension and hinder the intake of new vocabulary and grammatical structures (MacIntyre and Gardner 1991). This could make it difficult for students to understand spoken or written content, which could lead them to feel discouraged and frustrated. During the processing stage, in order to make sense of the input, learners cognitively alter and analyse linguistic information. According to Young (1991), anxiety has the potential to interfere with cognitive functioning and impede working memory, which are crucial for language

comprehension and production. Moreover, learners could experience cognitive overload, which hinders their ability to comprehend complex linguistic structures and successfully retrieve vocabulary (Horwitz et al., 1986). Lastly, anxiety can impede learners' fluency, accuracy, and spontaneity in language use during the output stage, when they are engaged in language production through speaking and writing activities (Gregersen and Horwitz 2002). According to Horwitz et al. (1986), learners may experience performance anxiety, fearing negative evaluation or making mistakes in front of others. Consequently, learners could engage in avoidance behaviours that hinder language development, such as being silent or participating less in communication tasks (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991).

Causes of FLA

Research on FLA has proposed some findings on the causes of language anxiety among learners. According to MacIntyre (2017), language anxiety is triggered by academic causes such as pronunciation errors and teacher's harsh or embarrassing error correction, cognitive causes like fear associated with losing one's identity, shyness or low self-esteem and finally social causes such as fear of being laughed at and competitiveness.

In addition to the above, it should be noted that Young (1991) categorizes six main causes, which originate from three main sources: the learner, the teacher, and instructional practices. They are "1) personal and interpersonal anxieties; 2) learner beliefs about language learning; 3) instructor beliefs about language teaching; 4) instructor-learner interactions; 5) classroom procedures; and 6) language testing" (Young, 1991, 427). Being the source associated with a teacher, continuous correction of students' mistakes is one of the widely accepted factors of FLA. Although it is thought to be the most anxiety-inducing behaviour in the classroom, Young (1991) contended that teachers with greater authority considered they needed to correct every mistake made by their students. She also highlighted that low language proficiency and low self-esteem as well as competitiveness are the main sources of FLA associated with the learner. Students with low self-esteem can become very anxious because they are concerned about what their classmates will think of them. For example, the results of Price's (1991) interview study showed that students' comparison of their language skills and abilities to their peers and the perception of themselves as weaker than other students lead to the development of FLA.

METHODOLOGY

Research question

As mentioned above, research studies on FLA among students in higher education in Uzbekistan are inadequate. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate the possible factors that can cause FLA among students learning English as EFL in a linguistic context. This study will be guided by the following research question:

What psychological and environmental factors cause language anxiety among EFL learners in linguistic higher educational contexts?

Interview guide

To answer this research question, the current study utilized a semi-structured interview with a student to explore the factors influencing FLA among undergraduate students in higher educational settings. The semi-structured interview guide included a set of open-ended questions intended to elicit the interviewee's experiences and insights regarding FLA. The questions covered topics such as the participant's experiences of language anxiety, and specific situations or contexts that triggered anxiety in the academic environment.

To be more specific, this interview guide contained three questions aimed at obtaining general information about the learner and bringing it into the interview process, five questions aimed at identifying the factors that cause FLA in the learner, and two questions that focus on finding the teacher's role in the formation of FLA and classroom situations causing less anxiety in the learner. These interview questions can be found in Appendix number one.

Participant

One participant was selected for this study based on her self-reported experience of FLA during her studies at the university. Maya (pseudonym), identified as a female undergraduate student whose L1 is Uzbek, possesses an upper-intermediate level of proficiency in English, the L2 language discussed in this paper. In addition, the participant claimed that before entering the university, she only studied English grammar, as a result of which there are certain issues related to the use of this language in real life and classroom practices because of anxiety. Therefore, she was chosen purposefully to provide rich and detailed insights into the factors contributing to FLA in the higher educational context.

Procedures

The participant was contacted via email and provided with information about the study's objectives and procedures. An informed consent form (Appendix number two) was obtained from the participant prior to the interview. Due to the presence of barriers related to speaking the target language of the interviewee, the interview was conducted in her L1, which is Uzbek, in a one-on-one Zoom meeting setting to ensure confidentiality and encourage open discussion. The interview lasted twenty-eight minutes and was audio-recorded with the participant's consent to facilitate accurate data collection and analysis. Following the interview, the audio recording was transcribed verbatim into Uzbek. Then it was accurately translated into English, well preserving the participant's responses. However, it should be noted that surface phenomena such as ummings, stammerings, false starts and word repetitions were not reflected in the translation. A translated transcription of the interview can be seen in Appendix number three.

Next, in order to find recurring themes and patterns within the data, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013) was employed. Themes related to the factors contributing to FLA in the higher educational context were identified, classified, and organized into a coherent framework. The findings were subsequently interpreted and discussed in relation to existing literature on FLA and language learning anxiety. Ethical principles, including participant confidentiality and anonymity, were maintained throughout the research process.

Results And Discussion

The current small-scale study, based on the interview, revealed that repeated negative classroom experiences, being environmental factors, played an important role in the formation of FLA in the student. Moreover, learner-related psychological factors such as fear of mistakes and negative judgement by peers, comparing and considering oneself as less proficient than others, and constant error correction practice by the teacher have been found to further develop and provoke FLA in the academic context.

Environmental factors of FLA

According to the theory introduced by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989), the formation and development of language anxiety are due to recurring unpleasant educational practices experienced by the learner while using a second language. These researchers see language anxiety as an emotional response that is learned through negative experiences. In this case, the learner initially undergoes state anxiety, which is an unpleasant and transient emotional condition (Young, 1991), and the continuous and repeated occurrence of this sort of anxiety leads to a permanent relationship between language anxiety and L2 performance (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989). Similarly, while comparing her experience speaking in a foreign language now to the beginning of her major, Maya claims to have gone through a similar process:

...at the beginning of my major, I believed in myself, when my motivation was high, I thought that I would have no difficulty in speaking. ... I didn't have hard times at the beginning of classes. ... Later, during the lessons, I slowly began to notice that my speaking skills were low.

That is, during the lesson, I gradually started not being able to explain my thoughts in English during question-and-answer discussions on topics, and even if I knew the answer, I could not fully answer the teacher's question.

...This uncomfortable, anxious feeling appeared later.

It is clearly seen from her speech that the interviewee was motivated and self-confident when she started studying at the university, but later, unsuccessful attempts in the lessons caused her to feel uncomfortable and eventually develop anxiety.

Learner-related psychological factors of FLA

Horwitz et al. (1986) claim that some language learners experience anxiety when attempting to communicate in their second language. This anxiety is made worse by the students' negative expectations regarding the judgement of their performance that they believe their classmates or teachers would make them. In this case, anxious learners may have concerns about making mistakes, appearing incompetent, or being ridiculed in the learning context (Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002) and in order to prevent receiving negative comments, they excessively prepare to speak or make as few statements as possible (King, 2014). While providing some personal thoughts on the reasons for her FLA, Maya also mentioned in her speech that she was afraid of making mistakes in front of her peers and prepared in advance to speak:

Also, my classmates had strong knowledge, I was too shy to speak in front of them. I was very worried about what they would think if I make a mistake when I speak. Therefore, I thought... planned what I would say before I spoke.

But when I made a mistake, those around me seemed to look at me strangely. ...This made me feel insecure and worried a lot.

Horwitz et al. (1986) claim that learners who fear negative evaluation may become self-conscious and self-doubting because they expect disapproval or criticism from peers and teachers. In addition to learners' worries about making mistakes, appearing incompetent may obstruct their language performance and maintain feelings of insecurity and inadequacy (Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2014).

Furthermore, one of the findings of the current study regarding the learner-related factors causing FLA is comparison and self-perception as less proficient than others. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), this phenomenon often stems from social comparison processes, where individuals assess their language abilities relative to those of their peers or native speakers. Moreover, engaging in downward social comparison, where individuals view themselves as less skilled or competent than others, can exacerbate FLA by reinforcing negative self-perceptions and increasing performance-related concerns (Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2014). While describing her feelings and experiences about the different environment after entering the university, Maya stated:

For example, there were lots of knowledgeable students here who spoke English fluently. ... others could answer much better than me. I knew less than them, and the question of what I should do to be able to speak like them worried me a lot. I tried to study a lot to catch up with them.

I had pressure that my partners were stronger than me, so it was hard to get a good result. Then I fell into depression.

Similarly, after examining the diaries of eleven students, Bailey (1983) discovered that the students frequently experienced anxiety when they judged themselves against other students in the class and felt inferior to them. However, if the degree of proficiency of our interviewee's partner working with her in an activity was the same as hers, it can be seen that the worry of making mistakes and the feeling of being negatively judged decreased which led to feeling less anxiety and achieving better results. Giving examples of classroom situations where she feels less anxiety, Maya said:

I would also like to work in pairs. It is especially good if my partner's knowledge or level is the same as mine. I can speak freely even on difficult topics in this case.

Teacher-related factors of FLA

In the academic literature, the high importance of the teacher in the formation of FLA among foreign language learners or in its reduction is reflected in the research conducted by various scholars (Horwitz et al. 1986; Gregersen and Horwitz 2002). By creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment, teachers can help alleviate learners' anxieties or they can inadvertently contribute to the occurrence or exacerbation of FLA among learners.

According to Gregersen and Horwitz (2002), teachers can foster a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere by demonstrating empathy, encouragement, and understanding towards learners' anxiety-related concerns. On the other hand, some teacher behaviours, such as negative feedback, excessive correction, and perceived criticism, can increase learners' anxiety levels and undermine their confidence in language learning tasks (Horwitz et al., 1986). In our small-scale study, it was found that the teacher's harsh manner of error correction led the respondent to an anxious state. While describing one of the teachers she disliked, Maya emphasized that his constant error correction had negative effects on her performance.

...there was such a teacher... I didn't like him criticizing even my simple mistakes. He was trying to correct me before I could finish my speech. I felt like I didn't know English. Because... then I became frustrated. It made me nervous.

In the field of second language learning studies, there is enough evidence that such correction of the learner's mistakes by the teacher causes anxiety. For example, Young (1992) conducted an interview study with language experts such as Krashen and Terrell and the results of the research showed that the instructor's harsh manner of correcting students is one of the main sources of language anxiety.

In addition to the teacher's error-correction practice, it has been found that the teacher's characteristics such as being stringent and exacting not only made the interviewee an anxious learner but also led him to the point of wanting to skip classes:

...there was such a teacher. To be honest, I didn't even want to go to this teacher's class. Because he was a very strict and demanding teacher. Not only me, but most of the students didn't like him either.

Finally, as a last finding, here it should be noted that an increase in the degree of proficiency of a language learner leads to a decrease in various fears and hesitations in using the language and an increase in the self-confidence of the learner. Maya stated that:

I am attending additional courses to improve my speaking in English. Now there is a positive change compared to before, of course. For example, I can speak more freely in class. And I can participate in discussions. And previous hesitations and worries have now reduced. ...In my opinion, it must have been because of these additional courses.

According to the theory introduced by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989), It would be expected that as language proficiency rises and more good experiences accumulate, the detrimental effects of language anxiety will gradually lessen. Similarly, Bailey (1983) also emphasizes that when learners believe they are becoming more proficient, their level of anxiety decreases.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the factors influencing foreign language anxiety among undergraduate students in the higher educational context. Through a semi-structured interview, it was identified that a range of individual, situational, and contextual factors may contribute to the occurrence and development of language anxiety among learners. The main factors found in this study include fear of negative evaluation, fear of making mistakes, comparison with more proficient classmates, low self-confidence, and the instructor's harsh manner of error correction. These findings show that FLA is not caused by a single factor; rather, it is shaped by the interaction of learners' psychological experiences and the classroom environment.

The findings of this study also underscore the importance of addressing FLA as a significant barrier to language learning and proficiency development. When students feel anxious, they may avoid speaking, participate less actively in classroom activities, and lose confidence in their ability to use the target language. Therefore, teachers

should pay careful attention not only to students' linguistic performance but also to their emotional state during the learning process. Creating a supportive, respectful, and low-anxiety classroom atmosphere can help learners feel more confident and willing to communicate in English.

Additionally, the results of this study can be of high importance for my future teaching career, as they highlight the need to improve pedagogical strategies and create more inclusive learning environments for language learners. In particular, teachers should use constructive feedback, avoid excessive correction, encourage pair and group work, and provide students with more opportunities to practise speaking without fear of criticism. Although this study is limited because it is based on the experience of one participant, it offers useful insights into how foreign language anxiety may appear in Uzbek higher education. Future studies may involve a larger number of participants in order to gain a broader understanding of the psychological and environmental factors affecting FLA in similar educational contexts.

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