

## ANXIETY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS AT HANOI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION

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*Received: 03/05/2019; Revised: 15/05/2019; Accepted: 29/05/2019.*

**Abstract:** Foreign language anxiety has been recognized as a demotivating factor which diminishes students' efforts and slows acquisition progress. This study aims at examining sources of anxiety in a foreign language class at Hanoi National University of Education. The results suggest that anxiety exists in foreign language classrooms and students feel most anxious about tests, speaking activities, teachers' speaking speed and feelings of inferiority to classmates. Implications to reduce foreign language classroom anxiety are drawn from these results. Firstly, concerning testing, teachers should integrate speaking and listening skills into progress and achievement tests; ongoing evaluation should be given by teachers throughout the term. Secondly, teachers should pay close attention to teaching interactional skills, building students' confidence with both accuracy - and fluency - based tasks in meaningful contexts, using both target language and mother tongue appropriately. Thirdly, it is important that teachers create a low - anxiety classroom environment by encouraging cooperative learning, leaving students with sufficient time to prepare for the activities. Students can sit in circles, work in pairs and groups, and in some activities and games can move round the classroom.

**Keywords:** Anxiety, foreign language classroom, test, learning environment.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Most language teachers have experience dealing with students sitting at the back of the class, participating very little in class activities, distracting from the lesson, and having uncertain answers when called upon the class, etc. One of the factors making those students so passive can be anxiety. While anxiety has been widely acknowledged as an obstacle to foreign language learning, there has been no research on anxiety in English learning at Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE). Most students there have low English proficiency, which can easily be seen from their reticence and passivity in class, unwillingness in communication and uncertainty in using the language. The present study intends to examine factors, as perceived by students, that may contribute to foreign language classroom anxiety and implications that may help language teachers reduce such anxiety.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Macintyre and Gardner (1994) defined language anxiety as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening and learning". Research has consistently revealed that anxiety hinders the quality of foreign language learning. In fact, Campbell and Ortiz (1991) reported that a half of all language learners

experience a startling level of anxiety. In Wu (2009)'s study, 89 percent of Chinese learners, who, due to historic and geographic factors, have many shared characteristics with Vietnamese ones, experience a high level of anxiety in English class. Concerning the impact of anxiety on language acquisition, Crookall and Oxford (1991) claimed that language anxiety may adversely affect student self-esteem, self-confidence and ultimately hinder language proficiency. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) saw anxiety as an obstacle to language acquisition, retention and production; it, therefore, may create potential problems to learners during their learning process. Krashen (1985) analyzed the interaction between anxiety and language achievement. Anxious students may learn less and also may not be able to demonstrate what they have learned. Therefore, they may experience even more failure, which in turn enhance their anxiety. Besides, Ellis (1994) asserted that "anxiety negatively affects performance in the foreign language and poor performance, on the other hand, causes anxiety." Ellis (1994) also pointed out that learners' competitive natures (when they compare themselves with other students in the class and find that they are less proficient), tests, their perceived relationship with their teachers, their fear or experience of losing face are sources of anxiety.

### 3. METHODS AND RESULTS

#### 3.1. Methodology

##### *Research questions*

The primary goal of this research is to identify the factors that may contribute to anxiety. To achieve this, two research questions are raised:

(1) Do the students experience a low or high level of anxiety?

(2) Which factors do the students believe to contribute to anxiety?

##### *Participants*

The participants include 39 first-year students in one of the English classes at HNUE. The participants are non-English majors. They have learned English for quite a long time, since secondary or high school. Their English proficiency is pre-intermediate.

has been used in a large amount of research in foreign language learning (Worde 2003, Goshi 2005, Nagahashi 2007, Wu 2009).

The answers for each six - scale question were then counted. For each question, each scale (*strongly agree, agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree*) was multiplied by 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 respectively. To calculate the mean score (average score) of each question, the six scores were added and divided by the number of the participants (39). The higher the mean score is, the higher level of anxiety that statement reveals.

##### *Data Analysis*

By calculating the mean score of each statement, 23 statements were found to have the mean score above 3.5 (the mid-point of the six-point Likert scale). This suggests that anxiety did exist in the foreign language classroom involved in this study.

Rank	Questions	Mean score
1	Q10: I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class	5.4
2	Q9: I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in a language class.	5.1
3	Q14: I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.	5.0
4	Q29: I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	4.9
5	Q15: I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	4.8
6	Q24: I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.	4.7
7	Q33: I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	4.7
8	Q3: I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	4.6
9	Q7: I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.	4.6

##### *Research Instrument*

The present study uses Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to examine participants' levels of anxiety in the language classroom. The FLCAS, developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), is a 33 - item, self-report measure, scored on a five-point Likert Scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to strongly disagree. The FLCAS is based on an analysis of potential sources of anxiety in a language classroom, integrating three related types of anxiety (communicative apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation) as posited by Horwitz et al. (1986). Because of its reliability and validity in measuring foreign language anxiety, this scale

Statement 10 "*I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class*" received the highest average (5.4). Not surprisingly, 36 participants (92.3%) agreed with this statement (26 strongly agreed, 9 agreed and 1 slightly agreed). Students' exam pressure does not recently emerge from university learning context but from their previous education in which students have a lot of tests and examinations through which the quality of their learning is evaluated. Exam - oriented learning and teaching are still prevalent in Vietnamese society.

Statement 9 concerning *speaking without preparation in language class* and statement 14 concerning *speaking with native speakers* came second

and third. Statement 24 concerning *speaking the foreign language in front of other students* ranked sixth among the factors that contributed most to foreign language classroom anxiety. One possible explanation is that Vietnamese education system puts too much emphasis on examinations and uses examinations as a measure to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning. Consequently, students are so worried about failing examinations that they only learn what will be tested and ignore what will not be tested. At HNUE, students learn English in the first two years (general English during the first three semesters and English for specific purposes in the fourth semester). At the end of each semester, students' English learning is evaluated through a midterm test and a end-of-term test, both of which consist of grammar and vocabulary test items and have very little or nothing to do with writing, listening and speaking or other communicative skills. As a result, students reveal negative attitudes towards speaking English both in class and with native speakers.

The next highest mean scores were obtained from statement 29, statement 15 and statement 33, all of which are concerned with teacher-related sources of anxiety. 94.8% of the participants felt *nervous when they didn't understand every word the language teacher said*. While only 5.1% of the participants were afraid that the language teacher was ready to correct every mistake they made (obtained from statement 19 with the lowest mean score 1.9), 97% got *upset when they didn't understand what the teacher was correcting*. 87.1% expressed their anxiety by agreeing with statement 33 *"I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance"*.

Statement 3 and statement 7 both received the mean scores 4.4, ranking the eighth in the list of factors contributing to anxiety. 36 out of 39 participants (92.3%) trembled when they *knew that they were going to be called on in language class* (7 strongly agreed, 17 agreed and 12 slightly agreed). 87% of the participants felt that they were inferior to others. It is notable that while statement 7 obtained the eighth highest mean score in the present study, in Goshi (2005)'s study conducted at a private university in Japan, it received the highest average with 79% of the subjects felt other students were better than themselves.

The four statements that receive the lowest mean scores are 6, 17, 5 and 19. Only 3 participants (7.6%) *thought about things that were not related to the course during language class*. 53.8% of the participants disagreed with statement 17 *"I often feel not going to my*

*language class"*. Interestingly, 79.1% of the participants didn't feel annoyed to take more foreign language classes. Finally, as being mentioned earlier, the participants didn't feel anxious when their language teacher was ready to correct every mistake they made; only 5.1% expressed their anxiety.

### 3.2. Discussion

#### 3.2.1. Testing

Tests tend to generate the highest level of anxiety in language class at HNUE. However, testing, or assessment in a broader sense, plays an important role in teaching and learning because "it is a means by which students' language learning development and achievements are monitored over time" (Hedge, 2000). A good test provides learners with an opportunity to show how much they know about language structures and vocabulary, as well as how they are able to use these to convey meanings in classroom language activities. Therefore, besides grammar and vocabulary questions, listening and speaking should be integrated in a test. There are plenty of methods to test students' speaking skills, not just face-to-face interviews with teachers, which may be time-consuming, depressing and stressful. Instead, a group of three or four students can be invited to join a discussion about, say, where they went on holiday, benefits of sports/ music, hobbies, etc. This will encourage students to learn and practice "useful language" (the term used by Cunningham et al. in *New Cutting Edge*) like: making suggestions, invitations, requests, offers, agreeing, disagreeing, accepting and refusing, etc. Teachers observe the group discussion and give marks.

Apart from achievement tests at the end of the term, language teachers should use progress tests, and/or they can evaluate students' homework, class pair-work/group-work, individual/group presentations, etc. throughout the term. These marks, together with that of the final test will be calculated and the final results will be used for evaluation. Ongoing evaluation may help reduce final - test pressure and extrinsically motivate students to learn the language throughout the term, not just when the test is upcoming as they usually do. One thing to remember is that no matter what is tested, the test must be suitable for students' level; taking tests should by no means be like jumping hurdles that seem too high for them.

#### 3.2.2. Teaching speaking

With the increasing prevalence of communicative language teaching approach, speaking is no longer neglected. Bygate (1987) asserted that "speaking deserves attention, etc. and learners need to be able to

speak with confidence in order to carry out many of their most basic transactions". Besides, very often, learners tend to feel uncomfortable in class speaking activities and in real communication with foreigners. Thus, a considerable amount of class time and effort should be spent on teaching and learning speaking.

Firstly, teachers should be aware that speaking is not spoken writing. In order to speak in a foreign language, learners need to know how to articulate sounds; they need to have adequate vocabulary and the mastery of grammar. They also need to distinguish types of speaking situations, make themselves understood and manage interaction, i.e. how to start and end a conversation, how to respond appropriately, how to take turns, etc. Individual sounds, word stress, sentence stress, intonation should be integrated into lessons either through activities which prepare for speaking tasks or through follow-up activities (Hedge, 2000).

Secondly, to build up students' confidence in communication, teachers should avoid calling on students and have a balance between accuracy- and fluency-based tasks. Beginners need a strong focus on learning to use grammar, vocabulary, and features of pronunciation in more controlled forms of practice. When they are confident in using the language, they will need opportunities to use the resources they have acquired in fluency work which stimulates real language use. Accuracy-based practice should be made meaningful, so that there will be no gap between linguistic forms and communicative functions. For example, when teaching *will/be going to* for future plans, teachers used to ask students to speak to their friend(s) what they will do and what they are going to do in the future. However, it is not normal in everyday life for people to list and tell others 5-10 plans or intentions. The practice of *will/ be going to* would be more meaningful if students were provided with such situations as: ask your partners about their plans for this weekend, share with your partners what you are going to do to improve your English this term, what you will do if you see your friend cheating during tests, etc. Sharing their own ideas, feelings and preferences also personalise practice, which makes language more memorable. For fluency- based tasks, teachers can use free discussion, role-play, and "information gap" activities. For example, to learn vocabulary of items people bring on their holiday and ways of making suggestions, agreeing and disagreeing, each group of 3-4 students are required to imagine they are going to live alone on an island for 3 days and they

are allowed to take 12 most useful items; they have to discuss what to take and why.

Thirdly, although students look forward to teachers' mistake correction, they feel anxious when they do not understand what the teacher is correcting and when they do not understand every word the teacher said. It is important that teachers slow down the speed of speaking and use mother tongue and foreign language with an appropriate proportion so that all students can keep up with what is going on in class.

### 3.2.3. *Creating a positive learning environment*

Learning environment involves physical conditions and classroom atmosphere. The former refers to the classroom size, chairs, desk, tables, lights, boards and even bulletin boards. Harmer (1992) confirmed that such physical conditions have great influence on students' learning as well as their attitudes toward the subject matter. Lightbrown and Spada (1999) mentioned the role of the other factor, the classroom atmosphere, by saying that supportive and non-threatening atmosphere makes a contribution to learners' motivation. Teachers can create a positive climate for classroom communication by having students sit in circles and leaving them with sufficient time to understand instructions and prepare for activities. Some light music may help reduce anxiety and make students more excited about the lesson. Teachers should allow students move round the classroom in certain activities. As Nagahashi (2007) asserted that cooperative learning can reduce language anxiety in the foreign language classroom, teachers should design pair work and group work activities and games even for grammar practice. For example, for the purpose of verb tense revision, groups of students are involved in the game "Find someone who...". They have to find who in their class did/ do/ will do the things listed on a piece of paper. They have to move round the class and interview their classmates with questions like "Will you get married as soon as you graduate?", "Did you have a boy/girl friend at high school?" or "Have you ever cheated in exams?"... During games, classroom atmosphere is certainly relaxing and comfortable.

## 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study has answered the two research questions. (1) Students at HNUE experience a high level of anxiety in foreign language classrooms and (2) tests and lack of confidence in communication are the factors that contribute the most to foreign language anxiety. Language teachers should be aware of the existence of anxiety in their classroom and techniques to reduce it. Further studies might be an attempt to investigate the

relationship between anxiety and learning outcomes and factors that students believe to reduce anxiety.

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