

# THE EXPLORATION OF FACTORS TRIGGERING FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY: LEARNERS' VOICE

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**Abstract:** This article presents the findings of a study looking at the factors which learners believe have contributed to their anxiety in their foreign language learning. A questionnaire with a three-point Likert scale was developed and used as the means for data collection. Descriptive analysis of the data, focusing on mean scores, was carried out using SPSS software. The results indicate that most learners experienced foreign language anxiety in their learning. Factors such as lack of preparation, lack of confidence and fear of failing the class have been the major contributors to learners' foreign language anxiety.

**Key words:** Foreign language, learning, anxiety, performance.

Foreign language anxiety is not a new issue within the global context of foreign language learning. Many researchers have investigated this issue overseas, particularly, with regard to the influence of FL anxiety on learning and the strategies learners use to cope with their anxiety (Horwitz and Young, 1991; Worde, 1998; Kondo and Ling, 2004). Although it is not considered a new issue, there has been little information as to how foreign language anxiety has been experienced by Indonesian learners who study English as a foreign language.

It is argued that learners can easily feel anxious when exposed to foreign language situations (Worde, 1998). According to Worde, more than half of foreign language learners experience some kinds of anxiety in their learning. It is obvious that anxiety in the foreign language learning is not an unusual matter and, in fact, most learners have experienced some kind of anxiety in their learning.

Despite the common nature, FL anxiety can pose potential problems to learners in their FL learning (Chen and Chang, 2004). For example, when feeling anxious, learners may find their study become less enjoyable (Gregersen, 2003) or they may experience problems such as reduced word production and difficulty in understanding the spoken instructions (Horwitz and Young, 1991; Casado and Dereshiswsky, 2004). Gregersen (2003) further argues that anxious learners may also find it difficult to respond to their own errors effectively. In short, some literature suggests that FL anxiety can impact negatively on students' foreign language learning.

Anxiety, in general, can be associated with "threats to self-efficacy and appraisals of situations as threatening" (Papamihiel, 2002:331) or an uneasy feeling due to something threatening (Koba et al., 2000). Meanwhile, language anxiety refers to the feeling of tension and apprehension experienced by learners in the foreign language classrooms (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). More specifically, Horwitz et al. (1986:128) argue that language anxiety is "a distinctive complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process".

Papamihiel (2002) divides the anxiety into two types: state anxiety and trait anxiety. State anxiety is a type of anxiety which occurs because learners are exposed to particular conditions or situations. For example, there are learners who may feel anxious if they are requested to speak in front of the class or if they do not understand many of the teachers' words during the class. Meanwhile, trait anxiety is a person's tendency to feel anxious regardless of the situations to which they are exposed. In regard to this, Worde (1998) argues that trait anxiety is a part of somebody's character and is a permanent disorder.

In regard to the factors which may contribute to FL anxiety, the problems related to communication apprehension such as difficulty in understanding teacher's instruction, negative evaluation such as fear of correction and fear of making mistakes, and general feeling of anxiety such as fear of failing the class are considered the common factors that often contribute to FL anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Papamihiel, 2002; Casado and Dereshiwsky, 2004).

The main purpose of the present study was to investigate the issue of FL anxiety within the context of FL learning in Indonesia. As argued earlier, there is no much information about FL anxiety issue in the context of EFL learning in Indonesia. Thus, this study was meant to provide some highlights about the issue of FL anxiety within the enterprise of EFL learning in Indonesia. The study was con-

ducted at a technical college in the city of Pontianak involving a number of learners. In this college, to optimize the achievement of learning outcome, learners were grouped according to their English proficiency levels. The learners with a good knowledge of English were put in the upper intermediate class while the others with the lower skills were placed in the lower intermediate class. Both levels of learners were involved in the present study. In total, there were 76 learners participating in the study (40 lower intermediate students and 36 upper intermediate students).

To direct this study, two research questions were developed. They were: a) What are the factors which contribute to learners' foreign language anxiety? and b) Are there differences in anxiety causing factors across demographic differences?

## METHOD

The study employed a closed-ended questionnaire with a three-point Likert scale (disagree, uncertain, and agree). The items of the questionnaire were the modified versions of the items developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The following are the items used in this study (the items with (\*) symbol are reverse scored):

1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in my English class \*
3. I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in my English class
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the English class
5. I am glad if the teacher corrects my English when I am speaking \*
6. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in my English class
7. I worry about the consequences of failing my English class \*
8. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class
9. I don't get upset when I am corrected by the teacher while I am speaking\*
10. Even if I am well prepared for my English class, I feel anxious about it
11. I feel confident when I speak in my English class \*
12. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make

13. I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in my English class
14. I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students
15. I am not afraid of getting a fail mark in my English class \*
16. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says
17. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I make mistakes
18. I get nervous when I come to my English class with little preparation
19. I don't have any problems in understanding the teacher's words when speaking in English \*
20. I feel embarrassed when I don't say English words correctly
21. I feel very bad if I fail my English class

Prior to conducting the study, the questionnaire was piloted to ten conveniently selected pilot participants. The purpose of pilot study was to measure the reliability of items to be used in the study. The internal consistency was used to indicate the reliability of items. The reliability was computed using SPSS statistical software and the result indicated that the questionnaire has demonstrated internal reliability, achieving an alpha coefficient of 0.86. George and Mallery (2003) maintain that the items can be claimed to have a high degree of reliability if they have achieved the score of 0.8 or higher in the reliability statistics (analysis).

Descriptive statistics (mean scores) were employed to describe the central tendency of all the measures. The analysis was not conducted to individual items. Instead, the items were grouped according to the categories they were intended to measure. For this purpose, factor analysis was conducted to put them into categories. As a result, five categories were identified. They were lack of confidence (items 1,3,8,11,13,14), lack of preparation (items 6, 10 and 18), fear of failing the class (7, 15, 21), fear of making mistakes (2, 5, 9, 12, 17, 20), and difficulty in understanding teacher instructions (4, 16, 19).

Numerical values (disagree=1, uncertain=2, and agree=3) were assigned to each response. This was conducted to facilitate data entry and analysis process.

## FINDINGS

The data were collected and analyzed quantitatively to answer the research questions posed in this study. The mean scores (M) were interpreted as follows:

- M less than 2 indicates that learners disagree or are uncertain if particular factors have contributed to their FL anxiety.
- M more than 2 indicates that particular factors have contributed to learners' FL anxiety.

Analysis of the anxiety factors suggests that there are three factors which learners believe have contributed to their FL anxiety, namely lack of preparation (M=2.8), lack of confidence (M=2.4) and fear of failing the class (M=2.1). Of these three factors, most participants agree that lack of preparation (M=2.8) has been the main cause of their anxiety followed by lack of confidence (M=2.2). Meanwhile, only a few participants claim fear of failing (M=2.1) as the factor of anxiety. The majority, on the other hand, are uncertain about this.

The comparison of factors which contribute to FL anxiety between male and female students indicates that both male and female students consider that lack of preparation has been the major contributor to their FL anxiety (M=2.6). However, only female students claim that lack of confidence (M=2.4) has been the factor of FL anxiety while their male counterparts do not have a problem with this (M=1.9). In other words, male students are more confident than female students in their FL learning. In another case, male students are more afraid of failing their English class (M=2.2) than female students. Therefore, they include this as the cause of their FL anxiety along with the lack of preparation. Meanwhile, the female students do not see it (fear of failing) as the source of their anxiety (M=1.9).

The analysis of anxiety factor according to learners' English levels shows that both lower and upper intermediate learners consider that lack of preparation has been the major contributor of their FL anxiety (M= 2.8 and M= 2.5 respectively). The data also indicate that lower intermediate learners are less confident (M= 2.6) in their FL learning than upper intermediate learners (M= 1.8). They consider that lack of confidence can contribute to their anxiety while the upper intermediate learners do not consider it as a problem in their FL learning. The upper intermediate learners, despite their confidence in their learning, are more afraid of failing their class (M= 2.2) than the lower intermediate students (M= 1.6) Thus, they also consider it as one of the factors that can make them feel anxious in their FL class.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings show that most learners have experienced a certain degree of anxiety in their FL learning. Factors like lack of confidence, lack of preparation and fear of failing the class have become the primary causes of their anxiety. The survey, however, surprisingly reveals that no participants mention that they have experienced difficulties in understanding teachers' instructions and also none reports if they fear to make mistakes in their learning. This is, to a certain extent, in contradiction with the findings reported in Pappamihel's (2002) which mentions that these two factors (teacher instruction and fear of making mistakes) are among the common factors frequently reported by learners as the causes of their FL anxiety. This could possibly happen because the learners participating in this survey have been in contact with English regularly either in or outside their classrooms.

The survey also observed the differences of factors between male and female students as well as between lower intermediate and upper intermediate students. It is evident that lack of preparation has been the major cause of FL anxiety mentioned by both male and female students. The findings also suggest that female learners are less confident in their FL learning than their male counterparts. They agreed to the statements such as 'I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in my class and it embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class'.

Concerning the learners' English levels, it is indicated that both lower intermediate and upper intermediate find that lack of preparation has been the major cause of their anxiety. In other words, lack of preparation has been the issue seen by all learners, despite their level differences, that may cause them to feel anxious in their FL learning. In addition to this factor, lower intermediate students also have a problem with their self-confidence. They find that they can easily get anxious due to this factor. Meanwhile, this is not the case reported by the upper intermediate learners. They are, in fact, more confident in their FL learning than their lower intermediate counterparts. The problem of self-confidence (lack of confidence) experienced by the lower intermediate learners is likely to be caused by their limitation in foreign language mastery. This claim is also supported by Pappamihel (2002) who argues that learners' limited competence in foreign language use, such as lack of vocabulary, can contribute to their FL anxiety.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

Generally, most foreign language learners have ever experienced some kind of FL anxiety in their FL learning. What might be different among them, in relation to FL anxiety, is the factors that trigger the anxiety. These differences can happen due to learners' individual differences such as level of English proficiency, gender, attitude toward English, motivation, past experiences and so forth.

This study, due to its limitations, could not cover all aspects of learners' differences, but it only looked at the factors experienced by two groups of learners: lower intermediate and upper intermediate and also compared the differences of factors experienced by male and female learners. The results have indicated that the majority of learners have problems with FL anxiety and the anxiety causes in fact differ in several ways between these different groups of learners. Generally, the findings of the present study support the findings of the past studies conducted within different contexts and settings.

A number of suggestions and recommendations can be identified as the result of the study. First, FL anxiety is a common matter in the FL learning context. Learners who develop such a feeling should not panic and feel discouraged. Instead, they should consider it as a process that they need to go through in their attempt to learn a foreign language and it is advised that they can think of ways or strategies of how to alleviate their FL anxiety problem so that it will not affect their learning negatively. Second, teachers play a very important role in helping learners deal with their FL anxiety. They are encouraged not to use teaching approaches which can develop learners FL anxiety. It will be a good idea if they can incorporate techniques that can aid learners reduce their anxiety and enjoy their learning. Finally, this study was conducted only to identify the factors contributing to learners' foreign language anxiety and the sample was only a limited number of students who undertook English programs at a technical college in Pontianak. Due to such limitations, further investigations are needed to explore the issues of anxiety in foreign language learning.

Obviously, future studies investigating similar cases but conducted to a larger population or different groups of students (for example, school students) will be useful to give a better understanding about the issue of anxiety in foreign language learning. Special emphasis may need to be placed on looking at the impact of FL anxiety (also the strategies used to overcome the anxiety) on students' learning performance.

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