Feelings of language anxiety amongst non-native student teachers

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Abstract

As rewarding as it may be, the teaching profession also carries with it considerable challenges and responsibilities. The transition from student teacher to teacher is a formidable step for student teachers. As student teachers approach the end of their teacher education programs and they become aware of the responsibilities and expectations of the profession, it is reasonable they feel overwhelmed, question their abilities, and experience feelings of inadequacy in language use, pedagogical competence, and overall emotional well-being.

Keywords: Foreign language anxiety, teacher education, non-native teachers, non-native student teachers;

1. Introduction

“I mix up words, grammar rules, prepositions, and subjects. I try to form sentences correctly, but because I worry about making mistakes so much, I just end up making even more. I forget everything because I get so anxious.”

“I worry about my English so much that I try to avoid situations in which I would have to speak it.”

“I make so many mistakes now, how will I ever be able to teach English in front of a class?”

The statements above are from interviews with non-native student teachers rapidly approaching the end of their teacher education programs. The student teachers quoted are talking about the difficulties and challenges they experience in using English - a language which they will very soon begin to teach. Most teacher educators and trainers around the world would concur that such feelings of uneasiness, inadequacy, and anxiety are widespread amongst non-native student teachers. However, research on student teachers’ feelings of anxiety remains very limited to this day.

Horwitz (1996) was the first researcher to propose that non-native teachers and student teachers may experience feelings of foreign language anxiety in the classroom. Horwitz claimed that as the process of learning a foreign language is never complete, non-native teachers are, in fact, still language learners in essence – no matter what level of proficiency they may have attained in the target language. Furthermore, non-native language teachers have invested considerable time, effort, and motivation in learning the target language; and as a result, may have set unrealistic standards of performance and proficiency in the target language. Faced with such challenges, it is understandable for non-native teachers and student teachers to experience feelings of uneasiness and inadequacy in the target language from time to time. When such feelings are frequent and repeated, they can easily develop into feelings of chronic foreign language anxiety (Horwitz, 1996).
Stemming from these assumptions, using the Teacher Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (TFLAS), Horwitz (1996) found that the participants experienced significant feelings of language anxiety. Assuming that non-native teachers experience feelings of anxiety, Horwitz (1996) claimed that language anxiety can have a number of undesirable effects on foreign language education. Briefly these are:

1. Teachers suffering from feelings of foreign language anxiety may tend to use English less and avoid using language intensive activities in the classroom. However, the teacher and classroom activities are the two main sources of English input, especially in EFL contexts. Therefore, teacher foreign language anxiety can potentially reduce the amount of exposure students get to English.

2. Students could potentially pick up on their teacher’s uneasiness and anxiety in using English, which could engender similar feelings in the students themselves.

3. Teachers are generally required to use English on a daily basis in front of the classroom. This reality could have a considerable impact on the levels of job satisfaction of anxious foreign language teachers.

When these effects are considered as a whole, it is clear that foreign language teaching anxiety merits being studied. However, this has not been the case as only a handful of studies have been conducted on foreign language teaching anxiety after Horwitz (1996) (e.g., Wood, 1999; Canessa, 2002; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Kunt and Tum, 2010). When these studies are compared to the studies on learner foreign language anxiety, it is safe to say that research focusing on teacher foreign language anxiety has remained in its infancy. The current study aims to shed further light on this phenomenon by addressing the following research question: To what extent do student teachers approaching the end of their teacher education programs experience feelings of foreign language anxiety?

In addressing this research question, the context, participants, and instrument used in the study are first described. Then, the findings are presented and discussed. Later, the implications and conclusions of the study are stated.

2. The Study

The aim of this study was to investigate whether non-native student teachers reported experiencing feelings of anxiety and inadequacy when using English. Quantitative data were collected through administering a questionnaire to determine the levels of anxiety reported by the student teachers. The findings to be discussed are part of a much larger study.

2.1. The participants and context

A total of 126 student teachers participated in the study. The student teachers were enrolled in four-year long teacher education programs at two universities in Northern Cyprus. The two programs were almost identical in terms of structure. Both of the programs are aimed at non-native student teachers and include a wide range of courses on language teaching methodology, linguistics, second language acquisition, education, as well as a number of other courses focused on developing student teachers’ English proficiency. Only student teachers enrolled in the third or fourth year of the programs were asked to participate in the study since only these student teachers had at least some practical teaching experience. This is because the first two years of the programs are mostly aimed at developing student teachers’ English proficiency and covering theoretical knowledge of education, ELT, second language acquisition, and linguistics. On the other hand, the third year of the programs includes courses in which the student teachers are required to conduct observed microteachings with their fellow student teachers ‘acting’ as foreign language learners. Student teachers in the fourth year of the teacher education programs attend an internship program in which they conduct a limited number of observed EFL lessons in real-life classrooms. Thus, due to the topic of the study, it was decided that it would only be relevant to include student teachers who have some kind of practical teaching experience.

2.1.1. Instrument

Student teachers participating in the study were given a section of Horwitz’s (1996) TFLAS questionnaire to complete. The questionnaire aims to elicit and measure the participants’ feelings and levels of foreign language teaching anxiety. The questionnaire consists of 19 items and a five-point Likert-type scale of “strongly agree”,

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3. Findings and Discussion

The average scores on the questionnaire range from one (1) – not anxious at all, meaning that the participant strongly disagrees with the items representing feelings of anxiety on the questionnaire – to five (5) – extremely anxious, meaning that the participant strongly agrees with anxiety-representing items of the questionnaire. The findings of the current study indicated that the participants experienced varying levels of anxiety. In other words, while some student teachers were found to experience low-levels of anxiety, a considerable number of the participants were found to be highly anxious in terms of using English. Table 1 below represents the number of participants, the mean anxiety score, the standard deviation, and the minimum and maximum anxiety scores recorded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Minimum / Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>126</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>1.1 / 3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First and foremost, when the minimum average anxiety score (1.1) and the maximum average anxiety score (3.7) on the TFLAS are considered, it is clear that the participants experience considerably varying levels of anxiety in English. When analyzing the data, the average TFLAS anxiety scores of the participants were first calculated for each student teacher. Then, the mean score (M) of the whole group was calculated. The standard deviation (ST) for the 126 participants was also calculated. As can be seen from the table above, the mean anxiety score was calculated as 2.62 while the standard deviation was found to be 0.52. Participants whose average anxiety score was higher than the sum of the mean and one standard deviation (M plus one ST) were categorized as high-anxious. In total, 19 percent of the participating student teachers were found to be highly anxious when using English. Additionally, a further twenty seven percent of the participating student teachers were found to have an average of TFLAS score of three (3) or over, just under the barrier set as highly anxious. In other words, although not categorized by the study as highly anxious, this additionally.

A previous study by Horwitz (1996) recorded that non-native student teachers experienced foreign language teaching anxiety to the degree that they abstain from speaking English and using English-intensive classroom activities. In addition, by conducting case studies with a number of non-native student teachers, Wood (1999) concluded that non-native student teachers experience feelings and manifestations of foreign language anxiety. More recently, Kunt and Tum (2010) used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure student teachers’ feelings of foreign language anxiety and recorded that non-native student teachers experience considerably high levels of foreign language anxiety. Thus, the current study is in line with and builds upon past findings since the results of the present study also indicate that an important amount of the participants reported experiencing significant levels of anxiety when using English. In the light of these findings, the present study carries a number of implications for teacher education programs wishing to combat feelings of inadequacy, uneasiness, and anxiety in student teachers.

4. Implications for teacher education programs

The findings of the study support the claim that non-native foreign language student teachers experience feelings of inadequacy and anxiety when using English. When the potential negative consequences of such feelings on foreign language education and overall teacher well-being are considered, it is imperative that measures be taken to create a non-threatening environment within our teacher education programs and help student teachers beat their feelings of anxiety prior to the initiation of their teaching careers.

Acceptance of the fact that it is not abnormal to experience feelings of inadequacy, stress, and anxiety from time to time when using English is the first step in overcoming such issues. This fact be accepted by teacher educators...
and trainers; and then, explained to student teachers throughout their training. Student teachers need to be made aware that they are not alone in any feelings of anxiety that they may be experiencing. Many student teachers are not likely to be aware of foreign language anxiety as an affective construct applicable for teachers. Thus, it would be beneficial for teacher education programs to raise student teachers’ awareness of this issue and inform student teachers of the reasons why non-native foreign language susceptible to such feelings.

Furthermore, teacher educators and trainers need to familiarize themselves with the guidelines for helping non-native foreign language teachers cope with feelings of foreign language teaching anxiety. Horwitz (1996) suggests having student teachers set realistic self-expectations for proficiency and performance in English while constructing a plan for further improvement of their English language proficiency. Also, Horwitz proposes helping student teachers appreciate their own accomplishments in English and familiarizing student teachers with relaxation techniques, such as imagining speaking well when faced with difficulties in the classroom, deep-breathing, and progressive relaxation exercises to combat feelings of anxiety in the classroom.

As described before, not only are most NNS student teachers in the process of mastering English and developing their pedagogical skills, but they generally also have very little or no teaching experience, which may very well intensify any anxiety they may experience. However, student teacher English usage during classroom activities, microteachings, internships, and oral presentations tends to be scrutinized and rigidly evaluated by teacher educators, mentors, and trainers. It is sometimes forgotten that such tasks were developed as tools for the development of teaching practices. In today’s teacher education world, most of the focus tends to be on assessment more than development. The evaluative aspect of these experiences likely adds to the feelings of anxiety experienced by student teachers. Past research on foreign language anxiety has indicated the fear of being negatively evaluated engenders feelings of foreign language anxiety (e.g., Horwitz, 1986; Kitano, 2001; Young, 1991). Although evaluation is a necessary part of any teacher education program, the aim should be to promote the development of student teachers while engendering feelings of confidence over feelings of anxiety.

5. Conclusions

The effects of anxiety on foreign language learning have always interested researchers. However, researchers have mostly focused on the foreign language anxiety experienced by learners. It seems to have been forgotten that non-native foreign language teachers are also, in essence, foreign language learners despite the level of proficiency they may have achieved (Horwitz, 1996). As a result, very little is known about the anxiety experienced by non-native foreign language teachers and student teachers.

As elaborated upon earlier, it is likely that the added burdens of still being in the process of learning English and having little or no foreign language teaching experience can potentially generate considerable feelings of uneasiness, panic, stress, and anxiety amongst non-native student teachers. The findings of the current study do certainly indicate that student teachers experience varying level of feelings of inadequacy and anxiety when using English, ranging from what could be considered as normal to relatively high levels. When it is considered that anxiety may potentially have a number of undesirable effects on foreign language instruction, the importance of understanding non-native teachers and student teachers’ feelings of anxiety becomes ever more apparent. However, it is vital that the findings of the current study are not interpreted as a bias against non-native teachers. On the contrary, previous research has indicated that non-native teachers have a number of advantages (e.g., Seidlhofer, 1996; Medyges, 1999). The sole aim of this research in the field needs to be to aid student teachers in making the transition of student teacher to teacher. As student teachers draw closer and closer to the end of their teacher education program and becoming teachers, it is likely that they become more and more aware of the expectations and challenges that await them. Faced with such formidable pressure, it is understandable for non-native student teachers to occasionally experience feelings of inadequacy when using English. When such feelings are frequently repeated, they can easily develop into feelings of anxiety paralleling those of foreign language learners (Horwitz, 1996). By focusing on student teachers, it will be possible for teacher educators and trainers to nip of this issue in the bud before student teachers receive their teaching licenses. Through taking the necessary measures, teacher educators and trainers can help teachers fight, and more than likely, overcome their feelings of anxiety in the target
language.

The current study was limited to collecting quantitative data from the participants in order to investigate student teachers’ feelings of anxiety as they approach the start of their teaching career. Future studies could also examine non-native student teachers’ feelings of anxiety when using English through collecting qualitative data in order to further probe the reasons and causes of these potentially debilitating feelings. Overall, more in-depth studies are needed in order to further our understanding of non-native student teachers’ feelings of language anxiety.

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References


