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# Language Stress And Anxiety Among The English Language Learners

Masoud Hashemi <sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department Of English , Toyserkan Branch , Islamic Azad University, Toyserkan , 6581685184, Iran*

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## Abstract

Language learners usually express anxiety, apprehension and nervousness when learning a new language. Language anxiety can originate from learners' own sense of 'self', their self-related cognitions, language learning difficulties, differences in learners' and target language cultures, differences in social status of the speakers and interlocutors, and from the fear of losing self-identity. Consideration of language learners' anxiety reactions by a language teacher is deemed highly important in order to assist them to achieve the intended performance goals in the target language (Tanveer, 2007). Language anxiety may also be a result as well as a cause of insufficient command of the target language (Sparks and Ganschow; cited in Horwitz, 2001: 118). It may be experienced due to linguistic difficulties L2/FL learners face in learning and using the target language. Within social contexts, language anxiety may be experienced due to extrinsic motivators (Schwartz, 1972; cited in Scovel, 1991: 16), such as different social and cultural environments, particularly the environments where L1 and L2/FL learning takes place. Using a qualitative semi-structured interview and focus-group discussion technique, this study tried to investigate the factors behind language anxiety among the Iranian language learners both within the classroom and in the social context, and has suggested a variety of strategies to cope with it. The findings suggested that language anxiety can originate from learners' own sense of 'self', their self-related cognitions, language learning difficulties, differences in learners' and target language cultures, differences in social status of the speakers and interlocutors, and from the fear of losing self-identity. Furthermore, considering the crucial role of teachers in second or foreign language pedagogy, a need was felt to investigate the beliefs and perceptions of language teachers about learning and teaching a second or a foreign language.

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## 1 . Introduction

Worldwide expansion of English Language has increased the demand to acquire good communication skills in English. However, learners of English language often express a feeling of stress, nervousness or anxiety while learning to speak English Language and claim to have, as mentioned above, a 'mental block' against learning English. "Anxiety is a psychological construct, commonly described by psychologists as a state of apprehension, a

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +98-918-851-2752; fax: +98-852-422-5353.

E-mail address: [masoudhashemi38@yahoo.com](mailto:masoudhashemi38@yahoo.com)

vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object” (Hilgard, Atkinson, & Atkinson, 1971 cited in Scovel, 1991: 18). Anxiety, as perceived intuitively by many language learners, negatively influences language learning and has been found to be one of the most highly examined variables in all of psychology and education (Horwitz, 2001: 113). Anxiety has been found to interfere with many types of learning but when it is associated with leaning a second or foreign language it is termed as ‘second/foreign language anxiety’. Consideration of learners’ anxiety reactions in learning to speak another language by a language teacher is deemed highly important in order to assist them to achieve the intended performance goals in the target language (Tanveer, 2007). Regarding language anxiety, two basic questions need to be addressed here. First of all, what is language anxiety? And why is it so important to learning and speaking a new language? Secondly, how is foreign language anxiety different from the language anxiety in first language acquisition? Generally speaking, there are two approaches to the description of language anxiety: (1) Language anxiety in the broader construct of anxiety as a basic human emotion that may be brought on by numerous combinations of situational factors (McIntyre, 1995; McIntyre & Gardner, 1989: cited in Tittle, 1997: 11). For example, (a) a shy student may feel anxious when asked to give a short talk in front of the whole class; (b) Language anxiety as a combination of other anxieties that create a separate form of anxiety intrinsic to language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986: 128). The later approach believes that there is something unique to the language learning experience that makes some individuals nervous. When this nervousness or anxiety is restricted to the language-learning situations, it falls into the category of specific anxiety. Psychologists use the term specific anxiety reaction to differentiate people who are generally anxious in a variety of situations from those who are anxious only in specific situations (1986:125). The intrinsic nature of language anxiety poses an additional challenge to language learners as well as teachers. The demand on communication in the modern language classes may enhance students’ anxiety, as there are more chances for their weaknesses to be exposed in front of others. Consideration of learner anxiety in the modern language classroom is deemed highly essential in order to help learners develop their communication skills in the target language.

### 1.1 Definition and Types of Anxiety

“Anxiety is a psychological construct, commonly described by psychologists as a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object” (Hilgard, Atkinson, & Atkinson, 1971 cited in Scovel, 1991: 18). Anxiety, as perceived intuitively by many language learners, negatively influences language learning and has been found to be one of the most highly examined variables in all of psychology and education (Horwitz, 2001: 113). Psychologists make a distinction between three categories of anxiety: *trait anxiety*, *state anxiety*, and *situation-specific anxiety*. *Trait anxiety* is relatively stable personality characteristic, ‘a more permanent predisposition to be anxious’ (Scovel, 1978: cited in Ellis, 1994: 479) while *state anxiety* is a transient anxiety, a response to a particular anxiety-provoking stimulus such as an important test (Spielberger, 1983: cited in Horwitz, 2001: 113). The third category, *Situation-specific anxiety*, refers to the persistent and multi-faceted nature of some anxieties (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a: cited in 2001: 113). It is aroused by a specific type of situation or event such as public speaking, examinations, or class participation (Ellis, 1994: 480).

### 1.2 Second or Foreign Language Anxiety

Anxiety when associated with leaning a second or foreign language is termed as ‘second/foreign language anxiety’. It is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon (Young, 1991:cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999: 217) and can be defined as “a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system” (McIntyre & Gardner, 1994: cited in 1999: 217). It has been found that the feelings of tension or nervousness centre on the two basic task requirements of foreign language learning: listening and speaking (Horwitz et al., 1986: 29) because, in interaction, both the skills cannot be separated.

### 1.3 What Causes Language Anxiety?

Since language anxiety is a psychological construct, it most likely stems from the learner’s own ‘self’, i.e., as an intrinsic motivator (Schwartz, 1972; cited in Scovel 1991: 16), e.g., his or her self perceptions, perceptions about others (peers, teachers, interlocutors, etc.) and target language communication situations, his/her beliefs about L2/FL

learning etc. Language anxiety may be a result as well as a cause of insufficient command of the target language (Sparks and Ganschow; cited in Horwitz, 2001: 118). That is to say it may be experienced due to linguistic difficulties L2/FL learners face in learning and using the target language. Within social contexts, language anxiety may be experienced due to extrinsic motivators (Schwartz, 1972; cited in Scovel, 1991: 16), such as different social and cultural environments, particularly the environments where L1 and L2/FL learning takes place. Also, the target language is a representation of another cultural community; there is a predisposition among some people to experience such anxiety because of their own concerns about ethnicity, foreignness, and the like (Gardner cited in Horwitz & Young, 1991: viii). Social status of the speaker and the interlocutor, a sense of power relations between them, and gender could also be important factors in causing language anxiety for L2/FL speakers. A further detailed investigation of these factors could potentially assist language teachers to alleviate anxiety in the classroom setting and to make the classroom environment less anxiety-provoking and hence to improve learners' performance in the target language.

## **2. Method**

Using a qualitative semi-structured interview and focus-group discussion technique, this study tried to investigate the factors behind language anxiety among the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) English students of Islamic Azad University Hamedan Branch in Iran both within the classroom and in the social context. The subjects were sixty EFL English language students majoring in English translation and literature who were chosen randomly from among 300 other students.

## **3. Findings**

A number of studies on L2/FL anxiety have reported the enervating effect it can cast on learning and particularly speaking a second/foreign language; this must be overcome by students in order for them to take full advantage of L2/FL instructions (Horwitz et al., 1986). How learners' perceive the language learning process, their perceptions about themselves and how they should be performing in any communicative event, and the linguistic obstacles they encounter while communicating in English have been found to be strongly linked with language anxiety.

### *3.1 Anxiety-producing factors*

The results indicated the existence of high levels of language anxiety in most of the learners. In addition, it emerges that the more negative responses came from Iranian subjects as compared to the participants in other similar research projects. It shows that there may be some cultural reasons behind the anxiety reactions of some learners (Jones, 2004). Adopting or achieving native (L1)-like pronunciation emerged as a big source of anxiety for language learners. The participants appeared to be blaming a strict and formal classroom environment as a significant cause of their language anxiety. Thus, these perceptions, can be considered a clear indication that the teachers should recognize that the language classroom could become a highly anxiety-provoking environment for students (Tsui, 1996: cited in Ohata, 2005: 148). For many language learners formal language classroom setting was a major source of stress and anxiety because of its demand to be more correct and clearer in using the target language. According to participants of the study the more friendly and informal the language classroom environment, the less it is likely to be anxiety provoking. So learners feel more anxious and under stress in the classroom environments that follow the traditional learning systems where the learners have to constantly drill or repeat some tiresome tasks like machines (e.g. audio-lingual language teaching method). On the other hand, language learners reported to be less anxious and stressful in environments that emphasize collaborative activities among the teachers and the students. Giving a short talk, lecture or presentation in front of the class has also been reported to be highly anxiety inducing, one which makes the classroom environment more formal and stressful for the learners. According to Koch and Terrell (1991), Young (1990, cited in Young, 1991: 429), and Price (1991), a large number of their subjects considered oral presentation as the most anxiety-provoking activity in the class. Some language teachers believe that students try to overcome their anxiety by trying to remember the presentation stuff and by rehearsing it, and then they bring another pressure on themselves by trying to remember what they have rehearsed and feel probably stressed because they cannot remember everything (Tanveer, 2007). The results of the

past research supports the idea that language anxiety, for untold number of learners, has its origin in the fear of making mistakes and attracting the derision of classmates” (Jones, 2004: 33). Jones also argues that language learners feel afraid because of “a fear of appearing awkward, foolish and incompetent in the eyes of learners’ peers or others”. As a result of the fear of making mistakes, some learners expressed that learning and speaking a foreign language in the classroom is “always a problem”. In line with the study of Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) on ‘perfectionism’, fear of making mistakes has been found to be strongly linked with the learners’ concern to save their positive image or impression in the mind of their teacher and peers.

### 3.2 *Socio-Cultural contexts*

The social context, culture, social status, the sense of foreignness of the language learners has also been found to affect the L2/FL anxiety. For the subjects of this study, social factors were more important than linguistic factors in causing language anxiety.

### 3.3 *Exposure to the new language*

Due to limited exposure to English language in some countries like Iran , language learners face serious problems in the development of their communicative competency, which is troubling for L2/FL learners when they are required to speak (see e.g. Lightbown and Spada, 2006: 30).

### 3.4 *Cultural differences*

The differences of cultures appeared to be an important anxiety-producing factor. The more uncertainty or unfamiliarity with the target language culture, the more it is likely to be anxiety provoking (Tanveer, 2007). The use of the term ‘losing face’, by the participant supports Jones’ (2004: 34) view that language anxiety is a concern of *face* in different cultures. Similar to Jones’ (2004) findings about culture as a causal factor in Asian context, an experienced female teacher stated, “It is not anxiety just about language but differences in cultural practices.

### 3.5 *Social Status and self-identity*

Social status or social distance between interlocutors can have a considerable influence on communication (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977: cited in Carrier, 1999: 70). Results of the present study showed that speakers’ sense of inferiority complex while talking to someone higher in status may cause stress or anxiety for them. According to Pica (1987: 4) unequal status between students and teachers can also be a source of anxiety for the students. This indicates that lack of confidence on one’s linguistic competence makes one feel inferior and apprehensive to communicate with someone having full command on language, e.g. native speakers (Peirce, 1995: 21). It can also explain the source of intercultural communication apprehension where unequal linguistic competencies of L1 and FL/SL speakers can make the communication event stressful for L2/FL speakers. Speaking in a foreign language was found to be disturbing because of the fear that it might lead to the loss of one’s positive self-image or self-identity. Various researchers (Peirce, 1995: 18; Guiora, 1972; 1984; Rardin, 1988; and Leary, 1982: cited in Ohata, 2005: 149) confirm social anxiety as a feeling of losing one’s self-identity which is deeply rooted in the first language.

### 3.6 *Coping with stress and anxiety in language classes*

Language anxiety has been found to make a huge difference in learning to speak a foreign language. Many researchers in their studies on language anxiety have suggested a variety of strategies to cope with this multifaceted dilemma. The most frequent suggestion learners make is to make the language classroom environment less formal and more friendly, one where students can make mistakes without looking or sounding inept (Constructivist theory of learning). Some teachers suggested that “instructors should create situations where students can feel successful in using English and avoid setting up the activities that increase the chances for the students to fail”. Others suggest a truly communicative approach where students are given chances to succeed even with imperfect language competence. Some emphasis on the use of drama-like and role-play activities, so that learners may feel safe in a pretended situation with a pretended identity (Suggestopedia). Some teachers say that instructions should be made

clear and it should also be ensured that the students have sufficient ideas and lexis to fulfil the task (Tanveer, 2007). In order to make the classroom a safe and less anxiety-provoking place, the friendly and encouraging role of the teachers was stated as crucial. According to Tanveer (2007) a general feeling among the learners was that the students' confidence should be developed to make mistakes while using the language. Teachers should talk about the role of mistakes to the language learners in the class. Teachers' positive way of providing corrective and constructive feedback on errors rather than interrupting and correcting students when they are communicating was recommended. Some teachers suggest making private notes of the errors that learners make and then later address the whole class without saying the name of a specific learner. It was also suggested that students' self-related cognitions and beliefs should be taken into account in order to successfully cope with language anxiety. It was generally maintained that teachers should take time to discuss or initiate discussion in the class by pointing out that it is very common for students to feel uncomfortable, uneasy and anxious while speaking English, thus inviting their thoughts about its possible reasons as well as solutions. This discussion according to Tanveer (2007) would heighten their awareness that the feelings of anxiety are common in most of the learners and are not associated with any particular individual. Thus, it would also help them to take away the feeling of competition or comparison that others are all smarter and more confident (Price, 1991: 107). Moreover, Students should be encouraged to think about their positive personality traits and thus gather their own strengths and build upon them". This way, instructors can "build students' confidence and self-esteem in their second/foreign language ability via encouragement, reassurance, positive reinforcement, and empathy" (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999: 232). Language teachers should identify the signs of perfectionism in the learners and should work to explore their earlier belief systems in order to help them to step down from the set standards at the early stages and then work patiently to achieve the desired standards gradually. Ceasing to make English native-speaker pronunciation as a model to alleviate language anxiety is another effective strategy that teacher should pay attention to. Another strategy was to abandon the practice of giving *summative* feedback in the form of grades and marks. An Omani ESL/EFL Practitioner suggests promoting a single sex class in order to reduce the anxiety and stress from the language learners in the class.

### 3.7 *The vital role of the language teachers*

Students' embarrassment may be aggravated by the role played by language instructors in the class (Horwitz et al., 1986; Price, 1991; Young, 1991; Brandl, 1987; Young, 1990: cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999: 220). The teachers' attitude towards and beliefs about language learning and teaching, their reaction to the learners' errors, and the way they create stressful environment in the class have been reported to be significantly related to second/foreign language anxiety (Tanveer, 2007). Many language learners think that the authoritative, embarrassing and humiliating attitude of the teachers towards students, particularly when they make mistakes, can have severe consequences on learners' cognition and their willingness to communicate in the class. A learner's mistake, as Jones (2004: 32) views, "may bring about humiliating punishment from the teacher under the concentrated gaze of one's peers". Jones criticizes those instructors he kill the classroom time for performance rather than learning.

### 3.8 *Suggestions for language teachers*

Language anxiety can dramatically influence the process of language learning and teaching. Therefore, it is necessary that language teachers not only recognize that anxiety is a major cause of students' lack of success in the new language but also assist them to tackle the feelings of unease and discomfort. Consideration of language learners' anxiety reactions by a language teacher is deemed highly important in order to assist them to achieve the intended performance goals in the target language (Tanveer, 2007). Based on the findings of this study and similar researches in this regard, the following helpful recommendations can be made.

- 1) Language teachers should acknowledge the existence of the feeling of anxiety and stress among the language learners and should apply quick and effective strategies to help them cope with those destructive feelings.
- 2) A truly communicative approach in language teaching should be adopted to provide those language learners who have limited exposure to English language with more chances to fully practice their speaking skills.

3) Creating a friendly, informal and learning-supportive environments for language learning by teachers' friendly, helpful and cooperative behaviour, making students feel comfortable when speaking in the class. This can also reduce the effect of social and status difference between students and teachers to a considerable extent (Tanveer, 2007).

4) Teachers should encourage those learners who are afraid of making mistakes to feel free to make mistakes in order to acquire communication skills. As for a positive response to students' concern over the harsh manner of teachers' error correction, teachers' selection of error correction techniques as Horwitz et al. (1986: 131) recommended, should be based upon instructional philosophy and on reducing defensive reactions in students.

5) To reduce the students' fear that their mistakes in front of the teachers will influence their end of course grades, more emphasis should be given to formative assessment (assessment *for* learning) and feedback rather than summative assessment (assessment *of* learning) and feedback.

6) Sometimes language teachers should initiate discussion in the class about the feelings of anxiety and should take measures to reduce the sense of competition among them (Tanveer, 2007).

7) To give language learners a feeling of success and satisfaction when using English, language teachers should avoid activities that enhance early frustration. They can instead start with simple step by step lessons so that learners can feel satisfied and relaxed when participate in language classes for the first time.

8) It is also recommended that teachers should confront students' erroneous and irrational beliefs by cultivating in them "reasonable commitments for successful language learning" (Horwitz, 1988: cited in Onwuegbuzie et al. 1999: 232). More importantly, students should be guided as to how to direct their attention away from self-centred worries when they are speaking a second/foreign language (1999: 233).

9) Familiarity with the culture and ethnic background of the language learners and an awareness of their previous language learning experiences can also assist language teachers to understand and decode anxiety-related behaviours in some learners. Teachers should specifically make the effort to create a sense of friendship and cooperation among the students. This will help them to speak more confidently and with less anxiety in the class (Tanveer, 2007).

10) Finally, language teachers need some specific in service training courses on general psychology including language anxiety in order to deal with the stress and anxiety in their classes.

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