RESEARCH ARTICLE

ESL STUDENTS' ANXIETY IN LEARNING AND COMMUNICATING IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Students taught in class and from randomly done interviews expressed great feeling of disorientation and anxiety in terms of communicating in English. These feelings are considered to exert a potentially negative and detrimental effect on communication in the target language. At tertiary level scaffolding the teaching method to give students the confidence level has been the main concern. In essence students on their part have to try their best to counter this problem even before they embark on their career journey. This study has attempted to investigate the factors that language anxiety can possibly stem from, both within the classroom environment and out of classroom in the wider social context, and has recommended a variety of strategies to cope with it. Previous research has been done to understand this phenomenon amongst students. This study used a qualitative semi-structured interview format and focus-group discussion technique to investigate the issue. A total of 40 ESL learners, participated in this research. 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. The pedagogical implications of these findings for understanding second language anxiety for enhancing learners' communication abilities in the target language were discussed.

KEY WORDS-Language Acquisition and Language Learning, Psycholinguistics, English as a Second Language (ESL)

INTRODUCTION

Many learners express their inability and sometimes even acknowledge their failure in learning to speak a second. These learners may be good at learning other skills but, when it comes to learning to speak another language, they claim to have a 'mental block' against it (Horwitz et al., 1986: 125). In many cases,

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students' feeling of stress, anxiety or nervousness may impede their language learning and performance abilities. Theorists and second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have frequently demonstrated that these feelings of anxiety are specifically associated with learning and speaking a second language, which distinguishes L2 learning from learning other skills or subjects. Both teachers and students are aware and generally feel strongly that anxiety is a major hurdle to be overcome when learning to speak another language. Learning a language itself is "a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition" because it directly threatens an individual's 'self-concept' and world-view (Guiora, 1983 cited in Horwitz et al., 1986: 28).

Two basic questions regarding language anxiety need to be addressed in the introduction, which may otherwise cause some confusion in the minds of the readers. First, what kind of anxiety is language anxiety and how is it unique to learning and speaking a foreign, in this case English language? Second, how is second or foreign language anxiety different from the language anxiety experienced in the first language? In general, 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). Researchers appear to differ in their views about the definition and construct of language anxiety but there is merit, as MacIntyre (1995: cited in Tittle, 1997: 11) opines, in discussing language anxiety as a unique construct because it classifies the source of anxiety for the reader. Students may feel anxiety in learning other subjects like mathematics, statistics, etc. (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999: 218) and the fundamental motivations behind being anxious may be similar for learners in various disciplines, but the sources of anxiety will also be a unique experience for each learner (Tittle, 1997: 11). The intrinsic nature of language anxiety poses an additional challenge to language learners as well as teachers. Conversely, 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.

Anxiety and speech communication appear to have a strong bond with each other. Speaking, either in first (L1) or second/foreign (L2/FL) language in different situations, particularly the situations that demand public speech, tend to be anxiety provoking. However, the anxiety experienced when speaking in a second/foreign language seems to be more debilitating than the anxiety experienced when speaking in the first language. Anxiety while communicating in other than L1 goes a step further with the addition of the difficulties associated with learning and speaking a foreign language. In a foreign language, a speaker has to look for suitable lexis, has to construct an appropriate syntactic structure and needs to use a comprehendible accent, plus the demanding tasks of thinking and organizing ideas and expressing them at the same time. Daly (1991: 1) while discussing the reactions to second language learning from the perspective of first language communication apprehension expresses that the anxiety experienced by many people while communicating in their first language seem to have many logical ties to second language anxiety. Educators and second language acquisition (SLA) researchers can get insight from the analogy of first language anxiety to cope with the second language anxiety. What 'anxiety' actually refers to and how can we define 'foreign language anxiety' are also important questions to understand the construct of 'language anxiety'.

Statement of the Problem

We live in an educational world where spoken language is seen as a necessary, positive personal characteristic (Daly, 1991: 7). Worldwide expansion of English Language has increased this demand to acquire good communication skills in English. However, learners of English language often express a feeling of stress,

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nervousness or anxiety while learning to speak English Language and claim to have, as mentioned above, a 'mental block' against learning English. The problem exists among ESL learners from beginning to more advanced levels. Even highly advanced ESL learners feel anxious while learning and particularly speaking English in some situations, both within and out of the classroom settings. These learners wonder why they cannot speak English well, because their compulsive efforts do not lead to their intended performance. Horwitz and Young (1991: xiv) – two well-known researchers in the area of 'language anxiety' express, "we have been truly surprised at the number of students who experience anxiety and distress in their language classes". Similarly, Campbell and Ortiz (1991: 159) found language anxiety among university students to be 'alarming' and estimated that up to one half of all language students experience debilitating levels of language anxiety.

Research Aims and Objectives

The major purpose of the research is to find out why ESL learners feel anxious or embarrassed while learning to speak English Language and what influence it casts on their communication in the target language. In other words, what are the factors or sources that make speaking English more stressful in some situations than in others. This study seeks to discover the phenomenon of language anxiety from both within and outside of the language classroom setting in a wider social context. This includes considering the factors originate from the learner's own sense of self, from the language learning process, or from the situation or social environment he/she is a part of. The second most important aim of this study is to find out and suggest some strategies for language teachers in order to alleviate language anxiety in the learners. It will also inform the researcher of this study about the phenomenon, as a learner, as well as a practitioner in English Language Teaching. In addition, integrating the findings of this research on language anxiety - regarding its nature, sources, effects and treatment – with the existing literature is also an underlying consideration of the study.

Research Questions

1: What are the psycholinguistic factors that cause language anxiety for ESL learners in learning and speaking English Language?

2: What are the socio-cultural factors that cause language anxiety for ESL learners in learning and speaking English Language?

3: How is language anxiety manifested in the learners?

4: Which strategies can be used to successfully cope with language anxiety?

Findings and Discussion

Cognitive and Linguistic Factors Related to Classroom Procedure

Strict and Formal Classroom Environment

Based on previous research done and its findings, the participants appeared to be blaming a strict and formal classroom environment as a significant cause of their language anxiety. They view the classroom a place where their mistakes are noticed and their deficiencies are pointed out. With regard to this issue, an ESL learner expressed, "In the class if you quiet then you are blamed for not concentrating and working hard enough. The usual teacher's comment will be, you are not paying attention". Another learner expressed, "I feel more anxious in the class because it is more formal but out of class I don't feel stressed, when I talk to my friends I am not afraid of making mistakes". Such expressions of the fear of being negatively evaluated under formal classroom environment lend support to the previous research that learners feel more anxious in highly evaluative situations, particularly in the L2 classroom where their performance is constantly monitored by both their teacher and peers (Daly, 1991: cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999: 218). 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). However, the participants asserted that the more friendly and informal the language classroom environment, the less it is likely to be anxiety provoking. These perceptions suggest that learners feel more anxious and under stress in the classroom environments that follow the traditional behaviourist theories of learning; for instance, the classrooms where the students as a whole class constantly drill or repeat the learning tasks like machines (e.g. audio-lingual language teaching method) and thus the power or status differentials between students and

teachers is upheld. Contrarily, students feel less anxious and stress in classroom environments that follow the constructivist theories of learning; these emphasize collaborative activities by forming learning communities including both teachers and students.

Presentation in the Classroom

Speaking or giving a presentation is considered highly stressful for all the participants. They get so agitated with the whole process of presenting. All the participants agreed that speaking in front of the whole class or in public caused anxiety for most of the learners. Another ESL student expressed, "When I stand in front of the class to speak or make a presentation I lose confidence altogether". Thus, the study reinforced the findings of the earlier studies by Koch and Terrell (1991), Young (1990, cited in Young, 1991: 429), and Price (1991), who found that a large number of their subjects considered oral presentation as the most anxiety-provoking activity in the class. 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. Most of the time students read from the power point slidesor small notes. They don't even look up and engage the presentation with their peers. This anxiety seems to stem from learners' perceived inability to make themselves understood or in Price's (1991: 105) words, from their "frustration of not being able to communicate effectively".

Fear of Making Mistakes and Apprehension about Others' Evaluation

Language anxiety be it in ethnographic and empirical from past research, for untold number of learners, has its origin in the fear of making mistakes and attracting the derision of classmates" (Jones, 2004: 33). The findings of this study were in agreement in this respect too. The participants frequently expressed that learners feel afraid, and even panic because of the fear of committing mistakes or errors in front of others, or in Jones' words (2004: 31) 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". One ESL learner expressed, "In the classroom other students' exception of you is high….they snicker at you if you make mistake. So, usually you clam up and go blank without able to utter any word….most of the time just a shrug of shoulders without knowing what to do". 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. Another ESL learner said, "Most of the time my teacher thinks I am plain lazy and not hardworking when I actual fact I just forget the words which seem alien to me and I find it hard to use in communication". This suggests, as an experienced teacher elaborated, "It is not anxiety just about language but different expectations about what is going to happen in an oral interaction"; in other words, how one is going to be evaluated by one's interlocutors. Not surprisingly, students get more apprehensive about making mistakes in front of teachers because they think it is more likely to influence their end-of-course results. An ESL learner said, "I get nervous because teacher always scolds me when I make mistake. The teacher will ask how many times to teach but you are making the same mistake all over again". Another ESL learner offered, "Every time I am called up to answer or present something in class I get this notion in my mind that the teacher actually keeps tab on my mistakes so I feel so self-conscious that I do my best not to make any mistakes". This seems to indicate, as found by Tobias (1986: cited in MacIntyre& Gardner, 1991: 296), that language anxiety is negatively correlated with language course grades. These findings suggest that assessment type and teachers' attitude towards assessment can significantly contribute to learners' anxiety. It might be beneficial if future research explores this issue in depth, particularly in L2 classroom. Students, in spite of reporting feelings of anxiety over error correction, also expressed their desire to be corrected in order to overcome their language imperfections, which a seasoned teacher stated was a "tricky job". Consistent with the literature on language anxiety (e.g. see Horwitz et al. 1986; Young, 1991), he remarked: Teacher has several different possibilities at his disposal for giving feedback with respect to errors, it's very tricky. Students expect and say to correct their mistakes but, when you correct, especially in front of the whole class, then it is stressful for them. But, sometimes, if you try to do so in a tactful way that really does not help. They know you are being tactful and they feel that they must have made a terrible mistake if you are

being so tactful. This view suggests that sometimes even *not* correcting errors, as a technique to lower anxiety levels, makes some students anxious because many students believe that speech correction is necessary in order to learn to speak a language well. Even if teachers do not correct their errors, they find it difficult, particularly adults, to endure a perceived high degree of inaccuracy in their speech. Resulting from a fear of negative evaluation, the apprehensive students reported that whenever they anticipate that complete communication is not possible and that they are unable to express a particular point fully, they either try to escape or "end up being quiet and reticent, contrary to their initial intention to participate" (Ohata, 2005: 135, Jones, 2004: 31). "I try to be silent, keep quiet…so that nobody should notice me, I try to escape…try to keep my conversation short as much as I can", one ESL learner said. Thus, it appears, as Horwitz et al. (1986: 127) believe, that frustration experienced when a learner is unable to communicate a message can lead to apprehension about future attempts to communicate. This would explain why anxious learners tend to avoid classroom participation (Ely, 1986: cited in MacIntyre& Gardner, 1991: 297), because they are either unsure of what they are saying or lose confidence when giving an answer

to a question in the classroom. For example, a ESL student expressed, "Sometimes I know the answer….but I try to hesitated….I may be, I'll predict this answer may be wrong".

Role of Language Instructors

In accord with the results of the studies previously cited, this study also found that 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. It emerged during focus group discussion 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". Similar painful and vivid past memories were also reported in Price's (1991: 106) interview study. The most common complaint about instructors he found was that many of them made classroom time a performance rather than a learning time. As one of his participants put it, "It was never a learning experience. You either did it right or you did not". Thus, it can be suggested that teachers' views or perceptions about learning a language and their ways of error correction are crucial factors to be considered in order to alleviate language anxiety.

Self-related Cognition; Variations in Individual's "self-perceptions"

Past researchers have posited that anxiety in learners is produced by their cognitive interferences based on self-related cognitions, e.g. their self-perceptions, self-esteem, perceived scholastic competence, beliefs about language learning, etc. (see Krashen, 1985; Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999: 228; Horwitz et al., 1986: 128-129). Some self-related cognitions found in this study correspond to previously cited cognition and appeared to be varying in individuals based upon their personality traits and earlier experience of L2 learning. Effective evaluation and treatment of these thoughts is essential for anxiety-reduction as they act as psychological barriers to learning. The highly anxious learners seem to hold negative thoughts about themselves, low perceived self-worth and erroneous beliefs based upon their self-degradation (Tobias, 1986: cited in MacIntyre& Gardner, 1991: 297). For example, a Chinese female ESL learner revealed, "I don't really believe my English language is good, I think learning grammar and language skills are hard to me". This rumination, according to Bailey (1983: cited in Onwuegbuzie et al. 1999: 220), may come from the competitive nature of students. Such negative cognitions put serious impediments in their language development; this lead to heightened awareness of their deficiencies and consequently to reticence when are called upon to exhibit their competence in the target language. Contrarily, less anxious persons do not have such exaggerated self-awareness and can therefore concentrate more fully on the task at hand (Tobias, 1986: cited in MacIntyre& Gardner, 1991: 297). A ESL learner who perceives himself to be less anxious because he thinks he has 'a big heart' asserted, "I can say what I want to say, though sometimes it is not right, not too much nervous. I think it

is easier to make more mistakes because you think a lot, you cannot pay all attention to something you want to prepare, want to say". The disturbing cognition in anxious learners appears to originate, according to Gregersen and Horwitz (2002: 563), from learners' high self-expectations and unrealistic self-set standards. Another important belief, consistent with the findings of Horwitz et al., (1986), is that language learning is a special gift not possessed by all. The same less anxious student maintained, "You may be good at Mathematics, you have a gift to learn it because some are sensitive about numbers because they have a gift about it, but for a language, I think, it is hard to use some gift". This is another argument that leads to the differentiation of language anxiety from other forms of anxiety, which poses an additional challenge to language teachers for its effective treatment. In spite of high correspondence, some beliefs appeared to be in marked contrast to what has been previously reported. For example, Horwitz (1988: cited in Ohata, 2005: 138) reported that some learners believe that language learning is basically an act of translating from English or any foreign language, but conversely, an ESL student expressed, "Sometimes I want to speak quickly and translate word-by-word in my mind but feel it does not work, make me afraid, stop me when I talk". Similarly, another learner stated, "big problem is time, need long time, one or two years are not enough", which clearly contradicts the reported belief that two years are sufficient in order to gain fluency in the target language (Ohata, 2005: 138). In spite of these discrepancies, the findings of this study replicate much of what earlier studies have reported about the existence of learners' self-related cognitions – findings with major implications for language pedagogy.

Linguistic Difficulties

In addition to the fears regarding committing mistakes and being negatively evaluated by one's teacher or peers in the formal setting of a language classroom, the participants reiterated some of the most common linguistic difficulties, which cause these fears in the first place. The SLA researchers have frequently reported students complaining that English pronunciation is too hard to adopt, and that the English language system is so complicated, so irregular, and with so many exceptions in spellings and meanings of vocabulary items. In spite of awareness of these difficulties, the results indicate that anxiety still continues to flourish in the learners.

Pronunciation

In line with the past research, pronunciation appeared to be a big cause of stress for ESL learners in this study. An experienced female ESL teacher stated with respect to this, "Pronunciation is an important issue across language groups because of its immediate effect on interaction. When you feel somebody does not understand you, you need to improve your pronunciation within a second, which is often hard and stressful". The issue of pronunciation anxiety has been found to be at higher level among ESL learners in this study. Consistent with Chen's (2005) study on "barriers to acquiring listening strategies for ESL learners", the participants mentioned the difficulties pertaining to immediately linking the word they hear to its meaning. The participants offered three different possible interpretations of the causes of pronunciation anxiety. Firstly, learning good speaking skills depends upon both the quantity and quality of listening in the target language. The learners in the contexts where English is not spoken as a first language in the community listen to the spoken words only in the class from the teachers or classmates who, according to Krashen (1985: 46), do not speak L2 well". The second interpretation deals with the fact of how different particular aspects of L2 (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary items, etc.) are related to learners' L1. While comparing L1 and L2 sound structure, the participants explained that some English sounds do not exist in their L1. They feel difficulty, particularly when pronouncing those sounds that they never have produced or even heard in their own language. An ESL teacher captured it as follows: Some students don't have some consonant clusters in their L1 which exist in English. Furthermore, the students can't hear the cluster in English because it is not in their vocabulary of sound. You have to do a lot of articulation work for them. Thirdly, the high demand of language teachers and their efforts to bring students closer to the native pronunciation model can also enhance students' accent anxiety. An ESL teacher further clarified the point, "I suppose, guess, it must come from teachers' insisting on people attempting a native-like pronunciation. It may also be because English is so pervasive in most cultures, in other words, heard quite often, that heightens their awareness of the differences between their and native pronunciation." Although these interpretations offer an insight when

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attempting to understand the causes of learners' pronunciation anxiety, they also call for teachers due attention when dealing with the problem in the classroom. In order to alleviate learners' pronunciation anxiety, the same teacher expressed the possibility that, in near future, teachers may opt to use material, which does not present native-like pronunciation as a model.

Grammar

With regard to linguistic difficulties, grammar has been found to be the second most important aspect that the ESL learners find difficult when learning to speak a second language. "When I want to speak", said an ESL learner, "I am not sure which tense to use". Another ESL learner expressed, "When I speak I am unsure which form of verb to use, I always have to think before I say". She further explained that verbs only have one form in their mother tongue and people use the words like 'today, yesterday, tomorrow, last time, etc.' to indicate present, past and future time instead of changing the verb form. She elaborated this point with an example, "I *go* to the supermarket *today*, I*go* to the supermarket *yesterday*". This difference in language patterns is a big trouble for non-native ESL learners. When asked about the most embarrassing grammatical difficulties students encounter, a teacher specifically mentioned non-native students' difficulty with English 'word classes'. She explained that the problem with the English language is the adjectives, verbs, adverbs or nouns that are from the same root, like *confidence, confident, confidently,* etc. The learners face difficulties with the word endings or suffixes that are not the part of their L1 system. Similarly, difficulties regarding prepositions, different uses of article systems in different languages, use of English modal verbs, etc. were mentioned as significant problems learners face. Such difficulties can lead to the impression that anxious students are not capable communicator in the second language (1991: 296) as they impede learners' fluency in conveying the spoken messages. "It is because they know that this is a problem and everytime they see this problem is coming while speaking, they get frightened", said the same teacher quoted above.

Vocabulary

The subjects' responses regarding the difficulties of remembering and retrieving vocabulary items are also consistent with past research. The responses lend support to MacIntyre and Gardner's (1991b, cited in MacIntyre, 1995: 93) research, which found a significant negative correlation between language anxiety and the ability to recall vocabulary items. "I don't have exact words to express my ideas", "sometimes I am conscious I am not using the right word", "I always feel nervous speaking English because I do not have enough vocabulary", are some of the utterances participants made to show their difficulties regarding vocabulary. As learners can process only a limited amount of information at one time (Lightbown and Spada: 2006: 39), the subjects reported that many words do not come out when required to speak in hurry. An ESL learner remarked, "Sometimes I want to speak faster and faster, I try to talk too much in short time, so ahm…uhm…haah".(She smiled and made a noise in the throat to show that everything is mixed up and the mouth just produces sounds without meaning).

Socio-Cultural Factors

Social Environment and Limited Exposure to the Target Language

In accord with the previous research, the subjects expressed that limited exposure to English in their environment which is a serious obstacle in the development of their communicative competency and troubling for L2 learners when they are required to speak (see e.g. Lightbownand Spada, 2006: 30). A learner said in this regard, "We could practice English only in the class, out of the class, no practice; lack of chances or practice … trouble when you find a chance to speak". This could explain why ESL learners feel anxious while speaking English even when learning the language in an English-speaking environment. The use of communicative language teaching approaches demand students to speak English who may not be used to it in their previous learning experience and therefore feel stress when they are called upon to answer a question. An ESL teacher explained, "In L2 environment teachers expect students to speak fluently and spontaneously. Students from other cultures may not have this experience; their experience may be to speak only when teacher asks to speak but not any other time… these different practices in the classroom, I know, are very upsetting for the students". It indicates that language teachers should consider the norms, practices and the previous language learning experiences of the students as an attempt to reduce their language anxiety. With

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regard to errors in the social settings, participants' responses were mostly positive. They feel satisfied with the way their errors are treated in the society, which in-turn encourages them to speak. It is only occasionally that they feel a bit nervous if people say, as remarked by an ESL learner, "Oh, you mean *this*, and then you feel… oh… because you just feel horrible that you could not manage to say what you want to say". Generally, the subjects expressed that people do not interfere because they think it "rude and impolite to correct someone who is having conversation with them" (Lightbown and Spada, 2006: 32).

Cultural Differences

The differences of cultures between that of the learners and target language 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 because, as an ESL learner explained, "You don't know how others are going to interpret what you say; you say with reference to your own culture and background which could be altogether different". Furthermore, an ESL learner stated, "It is a cultural aspect that you 'lose face' if you say the wrong things". 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.

Social Status and self-identity

Consistent with the previous research regarding the impact of social status on speakers' language and his behaviour (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977: cited in Carrier, 1999: 70), the study also found that social status or social distance between interlocutors can have a considerable influence on communication. Speakers' sense of inferiority complex while talking to someone higher in status may cause stress or anxiety for them. "I always feel discomfort when talking to another person assuming we don't understand each other", said an ESL learner. In accordance with the research on classroom interaction by Pica (1987: 4), the study found that unequal status between students and teachers can also be a source of anxiety for the students. An ESL learner remarked, "Absolutely, every time I have a meeting with my tutor, I try to speak perfect English, because I am very nervous to talk to somebody higher in status. Their English is perfect". 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 SL speakers can make the communication event stressful for L2 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. The findings of this study in this regard suggest obvious similarity with the previous research on 'social anxiety' (e.g. Peirce, 1995: 18; Guiora, 1972; 1984; Rardin, 1988; and Leary, 1982: cited in Ohata, 2005: 149). These researchers assume social anxiety as a feeling of losing one's self-identity which is deeply rooted in the first language. Rardin (1988 cited in 2005: 149) posits, "The general perception of students are they feel they will lose their identity if they start speaking or using another language other than their mother tongue". This apprehension was uttered by a teacher participant who remarked, "People are very surprised to hear the sounds of their own voice, especially if they listen to their own voice in another language, it sounds like another person. I think they find that disturbing because it is another identity they did not know they had". This finding is quite different to Ohata's (2005) interview study of ESL teachers where none of the participants referred to such theoretical perspectives. However, in general, most of the basic theoretical perspectives related to social status and self-identity have been replicated in this study.

Gender

The study yielded conflicting findings as was the case with the earlier studies regarding gender-related anxiety while communicating in a foreign language (e.g., Carrier, 1999: 70; Kitano, 2001: cited in Gobel and Matsuda, 2003: 23). The subjects appeared to have different experiences of feeling anxious or comfortable while talking to the opposite sex. Some male participants stated that it was only in the initial stage when they started studying in co-education at university level that they felt a bit anxious. However, this was not the case in environments where both male and female students study together; as an ESL learner said, "I don't worry about guys and girls because we do study together". This could suggest that only in those cultures where males and females students study in segregation, people are more likely to feel communication anxiety

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when talking to the opposite sex. Gender-related communication apprehension suggestively is entirely based upon one's own personal view.

Language Anxieties' evidence of existenceand how to counter the problem

Evidence of existence

Learners' anxiety while speaking an L2 is existed in a variety of different ways, which sends some signals for the interlocutors to identify the anxiety-related behaviours. Language instructors can recognize these behaviours and then can begin to explore their instructional strategies to overcome learners' anxiety. The various evidence of existences of anxiety that the participants mentioned seem to be similar to what has been reported in the past research on language anxiety. No essential difference of opinions or details has been found regarding the symptoms of students' anxiety. The obvious signs of anxious students described by the participants were blushing, rubbing the palms, perspiration, staggered voice, reluctance, poor performance in spoken activities, less enthusiasm or willingness to speak, less interpretation of communication used, less eye-contact, reading from the script while giving presentation, either too fast or too slow speed of speech, etc. Furthermore, some learners stated that they try to avoid the situation that appears to be anxiety evoking. For example, an ESL learner said, "I try to avoid…. avoid away from the situation. I won't go into much detail because I know my weakness." Similarly, another student said, "I'll stop speaking, stop conversation about this point, I don't want to show to my class that I am nervous". These results seem to indicate that language teachers can accurately and credibly decode the symptoms of anxious behaviour in the language class and can deal with them accordingly. Young (1992, 169: cited in Ohata, 2005: 150) presented a few suggestion to language teachers in this respect: " a) be sensitive to the signals students' provide, b) recognize the behaviours for what they are, c) trust your perceptions, and d) work to reduce language anxiety".

Ways to Cope with Language Anxiety

Language anxiety, being an unsettling psychological construct, has been found to make a huge difference in learning to speak a foreign language. Many studies on language anxiety have suggested a variety of ways to successfully cope with this multifaceted dilemma and this study follows the same pattern. Interestingly, all the subjects who have been involved in the process of English language learning and teaching for many years seemed to have given adequate thought to the ways of reducing language anxiety. The most frequent suggestion participants made was to make the language classroom environment less formal and more friendly, one where students can make mistakes without looking or sounding inept. A way forward to create less stressful classroom environment, as suggested by an ESL teacher, is that the "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". He suggested a truly communicative approach where students are given chances to succeed even with imperfect language competence. Another teacher laid 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). In setting up an activity, an ESL teacher stated that instructions should be made clear and it should also be ensured that the students have sufficient ideas and lexis to fulfill the task. 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. Earlier studies have reported similar perceptions of their research subjects regarding the role of language instructors. In Price's (1991: 107) interview study, the most frequent observation of the subjects was that, "they would feel more comfortable if the instructor were more like a friend helping them to learn and less like an authority figure making them to perform" (also see Young, 1990). The subjects offered some very concrete and practical suggestions to lessen the enervating impact of language anxiety in the learners. A general feeling among the participants was that the students' confidence should be developed to make mistakes while using the language. Teachers should talk about the role of mistakes in the class. Teachers should encourage students to speak out and instill in them that everyone makes mistakes and it is acceptable in the learning process. Students should be taught to make notes and write their thoughts throughout their lesson in class and outside the class to arrest this problem of theirs. They must be motivated to just speak without focusing on their mistakes that they are going to make. Teachers must also gain the trust of students that they won't be penalized for making mistakes and they are not graded based on the number of

mistakes they make. This suggests the use of *formative*2 assessment and feedback method as a way to reduce language anxiety. It was also asserted that students' self-related cognitions and beliefs should be taken into account in order to successfully cope with language anxiety. As a first step, 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. The discussion, it was assumed, 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). An interactive pedagogy accomplished jointly by the teacher and the student and oriented more to future development rather than measurement of the past or current achievement (Pryor & Torrance, 2001:615). Students should be taught to bank on their strengths and work on it to achieve contractive results. 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). Furthermore, the 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", stated the same teacher. Though many of the accounts from the participants bear much similarity with the strategies to cope with language anxiety reported in the previous research, a unique and altogether different strategy was also found, one which has not been offered in earlier studies. An ESL teacher, considering native-like pronunciation as one of the biggest sources of anxiety for a majority of ESL learners, suggested, "Ceasing to make English native-speaker pronunciation as a model to alleviate language anxiety". Irrespective of its practical implications, the strategy seems a reasonable step towards reducing anxiety in the modern communicative language classes. Yet another strategy, which is less unique but has not been clearly articulated or reported in any study on language anxiety, was to abandon the practice of giving *summative* feedback in the form of grades and marks. A third strategy, according to an ESL teacher, was to promote single sex classes, which is also a comparatively less cited strategy in literature on language anxiety. In spite of the variety of techniques found in this study, as well as those reported in previous studies, language anxiety seems to continue to flourish in the language classrooms. It suggests that these strategies are just a guideline for the teachers, as well as for the ESL learners, rather than a treatment of language anxiety. This also confirms the view that language anxiety is a complex psychological phenomenon, one summative assessment provides, as the term suggests, "a summary of achievement at the end of the course" (Harlen cited in Gardner, 2006: 104), which requires special attention by the language instructors if it is to be adequately dealt with. However, it can be postulated that apt implication of these strategies can reduce language anxiety to a considerable extent, even if they cannot completely alleviate it.

CONCLUSION

Although the existing research has provided a valuable insight into language anxiety from both statistical and descriptive aspects, the phenomenon, because of its complicated and multi-faceted nature, requires further exploration from a variety of perspectives and approaches. This study, conducted through individual and focus group interviews, was an attempt to apprehend the true nature of the phenomenon from a different perspective. The results of this interview study clearly indicate that the most anxiety provoking skill in L2 (English) learning is speaking skill. Almost all research subjects acknowledged that people feel anxious and nervous while speaking English in front of others. Some ESL learners even expressed that they feel 'stupid' when they cannot speak English well and others maintained that they try to skip or escape the situations, which demand speaking in front of others, either in the classroom or outside of the classroom. What seems to distinguish speaking is the public nature of the skill; this poses a threat to peoples' self-concept, self-identity, and ego, which they have formed in their first language as reasonable and intelligent individuals (Horwitz et al., 1986: 128). Every factor or situation that creates possibilities or enhances the chances of exposing their deficiencies and language imperfections in front of others is likely to cause language anxiety for ESL learners. This situation could be either classroom interaction in the form of open class forum, group participation or

class presentation, or giving a short talk in any public event is likely to challenge learners' communicative abilities. What makes a foreign language classroom a highly anxiety-evoking place is its evaluative nature: evaluation by the teachers, peers, and by a learners' own 'self', accompanied by high expectations and beliefs about L2 learning. It was found that the feelings of anxiety become more threatening when the language instructors' manner of error correction is rigid and humiliating and when they consider language class a performance rather than a learning place. Anxiety has also been found to be exacerbated by students' feeling of low proficiency or lack of confidence in general linguistic knowledge, the evidence of which students do not want to display. The subjects expressed many problems and difficulties in learning English language, like grammar, pronunciation, English word-class system, modal verbs etc., which were commonly thought to impede the fluency of the ESL learners and hence, were perceived to be major obstacles in achieving the desired performance goals in English language.

Whenever the learners anticipate these problems while speaking English, as elaborated by an ESL teacher, they get frightened. This lack of success when trying to achieve the expected performance reinforces learners' lack of confidence in their general linguistic knowledge and results into debilitating level of anxiety in them when they are called upon to fulfill the demand of any communicative situation. A major cause of facing these L2 difficulties was found to be the lack of sufficient input and chances of practicing speaking skill (output) in the social contexts where English is not used as an L1. Many times students reported that they know certain vocabulary items and sentence structures but they do not come out right when needed in any communicative situation. This indicates, from psycholinguistic perspective, that when learners' cognitive processes of using a language (speaking) are not regularized due to lack of practice, either in the classroom or in the society, these difficulties are likely to continue causing trouble for the L2 learners. In addition to these psycholinguistic factors, some cultural aspects of English language learning can also contribute to language anxiety for ESL learners. In their interaction with the English-speaking interlocutors, the learners may have a good command of linguistic knowledge (patterns of language, grammar, vocabulary, etc.) but may feel apprehensive to use it because they are not sure of the cultural rules. This uncertainty of the ESL learners as to when and how much they should talk in an interaction with English speaking people, creates an unequal social or status relationship between them which "disfavours attempts at negotiation" (Wolfson, 1989: 131). This explains why ESL learners feel anxiousness or stress in intercultural communication, in situations where they feel inferior to the target language speakers, both in terms of cultural awareness and linguistic competencies. Furthermore, they may feel anxiety in speaking English because of the fear that they may lose their positive self-image or self-identity they have formed in their first language. However, for effective alleviation of language anxiety, the comparison of the results obtained in this study with those of the past studies suggests that there do not seem to be any specific remedies for language anxiety. The strategies found in this study, as well as recommended by the researchers and theorists, could "certainly work as prescription for anxiety but it might as easily be advice on 'what good teachers' should routinely do" (Oxford, 1999: cited in Jones, 2004: 37). All such advice is excellent but also applicable to students who do not show signs of anxiety; therefore, the advice cannot be other than general (2004: 37). Language anxiety, it can be postulated, may not require any 'special treatment' but what it does demand is the careful attitude of the language teachers in order to understand and to effectively diagnose this phenomenon in the learners. Then, it requires the application of modern approaches that lay emphasis on enhancing learning opportunities in an environment that is conducive to learning.

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