

## The Effects of Foreign Language Anxiety on the ESL/EFL Students' Language Learning

Hasnahana

Post-graduate Student

Master of Applied Linguistics and TESOL

Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

E-mail: happy.hasnahana@gmail.com

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### Abstract

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*Learning a foreign language is always a wearisome task. The present comprehensive case study depicts the effects of anxiety, nervousness and hesitation of the learners learning a foreign language both in 'English as a Second Language (ESL)' and 'English as a Foreign Language (EFL)' contexts. The study was conducted with only one female participant studying in Australia, an English-speaking country and learning English as a foreign language other than her own native tongue. Her thoughts, ideas, hesitations and nervousness were dealt with to complete the case study. The most supportive method for data collection was direct interview with a structured set of questions. Finally, the researcher proposes some imperative findings and implications regarding foreign language anxiety and creates awareness to find out own solutions to move forward to participants' speaking or communication problem.*

**Keywords:** Anxiety, foreign language, awareness

### 1. Introduction

Anxiety can create interference in many types of learning, when it is related with the second or foreign language it is called "foreign or second language anxiety" (Tanveer, 2008). It is said by many researchers that language learning and performance are influenced by anxiety. The language anxiety is defined as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994 cited in Mohammadi, et al. 2013). Again, Foreign language anxiety is defined by Horwitz et al. (1986) as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process". Chan and Wu (2004) mentioned about five main causes of foreign language anxiety "an anxious personality, fear of negative evaluation, low language proficiency, competitive games, and pressure from parents and self".

According to Horwitz et al. (1986) cited in Aydin (2009), there are three kinds of language anxiety- communication apprehension (fear of real communication to others), fear of negative evaluation (incapable feeling of making social impression properly), and anxiety of test (fear of failing test or have unpleasant experiences). Wu (2010) cited in his study that

there are three groups of anxiety provoking sources such as-instructor-related, learner-related, and instructional practice related which create learner's foreign language learning anxiety.

Foreign or second language learning becomes a difficult area because the individual differences affect the learning process sometimes. Anxiety may influence negatively to many language learners which is the most highly examined variables in education and psychology (Horwitz, 2001, cited in Tanveer, 2008).

Some findings of the research revealed that learner's attitudes, beliefs, affective states and expectations are the major variables that influence the foreign language learning process (Aydin & Zengin, 2008). The results of the available researches on this area suggest that foreign language anxiety has considerable influence and effects on language learning process. Thus, this paper will focus on the foreign language anxiety and its effects on the language learning.

## **2. Objective**

The major aim of this study is to investigate how foreign language learning anxiety affects the learners' learning and how they find ways to overcome their anxiety while learning a foreign or second language.

## **3. Literature Review**

Some studies reveal that there may have adverse effects of anxiety on foreign or second language learning which may motivate the learners too. Wu (2010) cited that anxiety can be facilitative and debilitative where, facilitative anxiety helps the learners to improve their performance and debilitative anxiety, on the other hand, can be a barrier of learner's achievement. The studies found that the language anxiety may have the negative effects on learner's oral proficiency, communication skills, listening skills, reading comprehension, and writing skills. Plenty of studies found that high anxious learners' performance is lower than the less anxious learners.

Ellis (2008) states that one of the main reasons for learner's reticence or unwilling to communicate in the classroom is the anxiety. However, English language learners have the feeling of stress, anxiety or nervousness and claim that these are the mental blocks for the foreign language learners (Tanveer, 2008). This tie of problem can be seen from the beginning stage to advanced stage.

Foreign language classroom, in many cases can be a reason of an anxiety reaction which lessen their performance (Horwitz et al., 1986). Wu (2010) cited in his article that in the classroom, there are plenty of sources which are anxiety-provoking, such as- negative classroom experience, speaking activities, native speakers, inability to comprehend, a harsh teaching manner, learning context, and learner's learning styles. In front of the class, an in-class activity like giving a presentation or speaking produce the maximum level of anxiety (Young, 1999, cited in Wu 2010).

In some other researches, it is found that the students feel more anxious when they need to perform individually rather than choice to perform voluntarily. Moreover, the students feel more comfortable when they work with group.

Horwitz et al. (1986) reported that "Sometimes when I speak English in class, I am so afraid I feel like hiding behind my chair." "When I am in my Spanish class I just freeze! I can't think of anything when my teacher calls on me. My mind goes blank." Reducing this type of anxiety, the teachers have role to optimize anxiety by increasing self-confidence in a comfortable classroom environment.

## **4. Research Methodology**

### **4.1. Participant**

This case study is conducted with one participant, a Bangladeshi female student named Shuvro who is 23 years old studying Master of Applied Linguistics and TESOL program at Macquarie University, Australia. She has been learning English for around 12 years. This is the first time that she is in a native English-speaking environment. Therefore, she finds, in Australia, adapting to academic education system is comparatively difficult and challenging. She feels communicating with others and other assigned tasks like presentation, individual respond in class, writing and reading tasks in her course are acting as barriers in her learning. Before coming to Australia, she has completed her Bachelor from her home country (Bangladesh). She has not attended in any English course but completed her IELTS with band score 6.5. However, she has the most problem with her speaking. Now, she is in second semester and she says that she is gradually coping up with the environment. Therefore, she was invited to participate to this mini research project which is aimed to investigate perspectives and experiences towards the effect of foreign language anxiety on ESL/EFL student's language learning.

### **4.2. Procedures**

The main instrument of this study is face-to-face interview, as interview encourages interviewee to explain better on the specific issues and is believed that the interviewee is able to expand the issues (Schostak, 2006; Dornyei, 2007). The participant was selected purposefully as she is having foreign language anxiety in her academic process. A structured interview with nine questions with the duration of 15 minutes interview length was provided to the interviewee. The interview was recorded carefully with her permission and later on it is transcribed for analysis the data. The interview questions were designed according to the others researches and to find the participant's perception on foreign language anxiety.

### **4.3. Data Analysis**

This study used qualitative method to analyze the collected data with a view to revealing participant's opinions regarding the effects of foreign language anxiety in her language learning performance specially in speaking. Specifically, the answers which are related to the difficulties that she experienced were analyzed to investigate whether the foreign language anxiety has any influence in her second language learning or not. This study will try to find out how the participant is overcoming her difficulties too. First, this paper will investigate about her foreign language anxiety specifically what makes her more anxious and does the in class and outside of classroom situation has different anxiety or not. Later on, this study will focus on the overall impact of foreign language anxiety on her learning. After that, the useful and effective factors (as she mentioned about the integrative motivation or self-learning, friendly environment, and teacher's role) which are helping her to cope up with the native English-speaking environment.

## **5. Findings and Discussion**

### **5.1. Participant's experiences**

The participant has had significant foreign language anxiety and difficulties in English skills. She has mostly problem with speaking as well as in others skills like writing, reading and listening too. In writing, it was so difficult for her to understand the topic what her teachers asked to do for assignment as the instructions were not so clear to her. However, she was so shy to ask questions. She also added that the readings 'use of evidence', 'voice',

‘cohesion’, ‘referencing and paraphrasing’ were most challenging to her but could not share those problems to others by thinking that what would they think about her. For listening, she could not understand the native accent but she pretended that she understood everything to save her face. Speaking is the most difficult part to her. When it comes to present something in front of the class, she is so nervous and feels shy. She all the time expects not to respond individually in the class and tries to hide herself so that the teacher does not ask any question to her.

## **5.2. The reasons of participant’s foreign language anxiety**

The participant completed her primary, secondary, higher secondary school in Bangladesh where she experienced the foreign language anxiety while learning English as second language. Her responses from the interview is very much similar to the foreign language anxiety mentioned by Young (1991) in his article. First, the competitive nature of education system in her country where she was used to compare with others made her feel anxious. She thought her English is not good as others. This comparison is one of the significant components of ‘personal and interpersonal anxieties’ among the six components of Young’s model (1991). She always thought about the grammar and sentence correctness is the most important while talking to others. From Young’s model this belief can be in the component of ‘learner’s unrealistic belief about language learning’. Another reason is that, in her high school, the language teacher was so strict and not friendly and all the time the teacher looked for the mistakes and gave punishment for the mistakes. Teachers were not well-trained to give effective feedback to students and that can be another reason of increasing foreign language learning anxiety. The last and most significant reason is that, the classroom activities were fearful and boring. She is always afraid and nervous of oral presentation in front of the class.

According to the above discussion the learner’s foreign language anxiety was related to the specific situations or contexts when she was in the English language classes. She was more nervous when she needed to communicate or present something to others or in front of class in English specifically in speaking activities. However, her foreign language anxieties can be categorized as ‘situation specific anxieties’ (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

## **5.3. Effects of foreign language anxiety on participant**

From the interview, it is found that her learning was enhanced with effects of both positive and negative foreign language anxiety. Though, she had problem with other skills of English (Writing, reading and Listening) but she was more anxious when it is about speaking skill which has a negative impact on her in class performance. During her elementary or secondary level, it was not mandatory to communicate in English as the class was also taken in L1 (mother tongue) and seldom in English and that was her comfort zone to learn English. However, when she was in her university for the bachelor degree, she had to communicate in English with her teachers and peers. The classes were taken in English and that level was the most challenging part for her. Still, she was thinking about the correctness of grammar and sentence and the fluency which led her to the ‘communicative apprehension’ (Horwitz & Cope, 1986). She was sometimes felt upset and demotivated to improve her speaking proficiency. She could not answer teachers’ questions though she knew it and she stood silently and felt embarrassed in front of class. She felt embarrassed even when the teachers or peers corrected her (Khattak, 2011 cited at Kamrulzaman, Ibrahim, Yunus and Ishak, 2013). When she came to Australia for her higher study, she again felt anxious in this native English-speaking environment. She felt shy and nervous to communicate with her peers and teachers

because of her accent. In her in-class presentation, she felt about what others were thinking. She did not interact with others that much and afraid of asking questions though she did not understand the topic clearly.

Though, in her country, she had major problem in her speaking, she was doing very well in her written exam. This made her confident and influenced her to improve her speaking by overcoming nervousness and shyness. This confidence forced her to come to Australia to have a higher degree. She is now gradually improving her speaking as she feels that the environment and the teachers, peers are so friendly to improve her speaking proficiency. However, both debilitating and facilitating anxieties influenced her English language learning. Facilitating anxieties motivated her to face the challenges of improving English speaking skill.

#### **5.4. Awareness of overcoming foreign language anxiety**

The participant shared how gradually she was improving her foreign language anxieties. Her self-motivation, teachers' role, self-learning process, friendly environment of learning has helped a lot to lessen her foreign language anxiety.

She did not think about improving her speaking before going to the university for bachelor degree. She started to watch English movie and listened to English songs to improve her speaking and listening. She was familiar with different native accents and pronunciation of the native English speakers. She started to attend to class presentation though before presenting she memorized everything. One of her teachers encouraged her to speak in English as she was a good student and did good in written exams. She was confident while speaking with that particular teachers but not with others. However, her speaking was improved a lot by that time but had less confidence to communicate with others. While, she was in Australia, she got more space to practice as she must need to speak English to communicate with others. In class activities, group work, group discussion, group presentation, friendly peers and teachers has made her more confident to improve her speaking and other skill's proficiency. She is now more confident and fluent than before (staying at her home country).

She thinks for learning a foreign language, a less stressful and friendly environment is essential. The learning environment in Bangladesh and Australia is totally different. In Australia, if anybody makes any mistakes, people will ignore that which is opposite in Bangladesh. Here, no one will make fun or laugh at if the speakers are not fluent and have grammatical problems. The university teachers are more friendly and flexible in Australia than Bangladesh. Teacher's friendly behavior, effective and positive feedback, and effective teaching style (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998) with interesting activities has made her more confident and helped to reduce anxiety.

#### **6. Recommendation**

The participant feels anxious even in advanced foreign language learner particularly to speak English in some situations both in class and outside of classroom settings. She feels why she can't speak English well; this feeling makes her more anxious. However, she has agreed that her foreign language anxiety is reduced now compared to the situation when she was in the first semester here. This native- speaking environment is helping her a lot to lessen her anxiety and increasing her overall performance in class or outside of classroom.

Her points reflect that moving to English speaking countries is benefitted to improve the language learning and reduce the foreign language anxiety which can be a barrier to learn foreign or second language than staying at non-native countries. The participant then suggested some ways to overcome someone's foreign language anxiety such as self-motivation is important for ESL/EFL learners. However, she also mentioned about 'self-talk'

(young, 1991) to be supportive to reduce the anxiety in some specific situations. Friendly and less stressed learning environment is required to reduce anxiety; as stressed situation creates learner's anxiety and demotivate to learn English (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991 cited at Dornyei and Csizer, 1998). Interesting and engaging materials and activities can be effective to lessen the anxiety. Flexible teaching style, effective feedback, supports from teachers and peers can reduce the foreign language anxiety.

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings were consistent with the prior studies what have been reported by many researchers about learner's foreign language anxieties in learning a language (i.e. English). The findings of this study reveal the factors, reasons, effects, way of reducing foreign language anxiety of a language learner. Most of the learners face these kinds of experiences while learning a second/foreign language. Here, the findings show us mainly the importance of a friendly, flexible, less stresses learning environments. This study specifically talks about the context of Australia and Bangladesh. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized in other countries or contexts. However, some students may find it effective to reduce their foreign language anxieties and teachers may ensure a friendly and effective learning environment.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview

This Interview is to investigate a Bangladeshi student's foreign language anxiety and its effects on second language learning.

#### Part-1: Background Information

- How long have you learnt English?
- What degree are you doing at Macquarie University?
- Have you been to any English-speaking countries before?
- What did you study in your home country Bangladesh?

#### Part-2: Interview Questions

- From the four skills of English, which one is most difficult to you?
- Have you found any difficulties in speaking in your country and in Australia? Would you mind to share in details?
- In your opinion, what is the reason that creates the foreign language anxiety?
- Do you think that your second language learning has affected by the foreign language anxiety?
- In which ways your learning got affected?
- In your opinion, what are the factors that arise foreign language anxiety?
- Would you mind to share the effects of foreign language anxiety in your learning in the both context in Australia and Bangladesh?
- Does your foreign language anxiety remain same or it is lessening now as you are in second semester? Can you please explain in details?
- Do you suggest any recommendation for others to lessen their foreign language anxiety?

### Transcript

- I** : (Interviewer): Hi Shuvro, how is everything?
- S** : (Interviewee): I am fine. What about you?
- I** : I am alright. Thank you so much for coming. Can I start the interview now?
- S** : yeah. I am ready.
- I** : How long have you learnt English?
- S** : Around 12 years. mm... Actually, after my mother tongue Bengali, we give emphasis on learning English from our childhood. So, from my primary level I have started to learn English as a second language.
- I** : ok, that's interesting. So, what course are you doing at Macquarie University?
- S** : Well I'm doing masters of applied linguistics and TESOL here. This is my second semester.
- I** : Wow. That's great. Have you been to any English-speaking Country before?
- S** : No, no. this is the first time that I'm outside of my home country Bangladesh.
- I** : ok! Same as me. Can you please tell me what did you study in Bangladesh?
- S** : Well, I have Completed my Bachelor in English from a private university. Then I participated to IELTS to come to Australia and got 6.5 band.
- I** : Wow! That's great. So, from the four major skills of English, which one is the most difficult to You?
- S** : For me Every skill had some difficulties. But I have suffered a lot with my speaking skills.

**I** : Oh, I see. Here you found any difficulties in Speaking in your country and in Australia? Would you mind to Share in Details?

**S** : uhm. I have faced a lot of difficulties as I'm so shy and nervous of public speaking. I always think what other will think or say. I am always uncomfortable to communicate in English in both place but it is improving now being in an English-Speaking Country.

**I** : It's a great that your speaking is improving. In your opinion what is the reason that creates the foreign language anxiety.

**S** : Well, I always give emphasize on Grammar and sentence correctness. I also compare myself with others as it is so completable in my Country. In high school, teachers we so strict and not friendly and always looked for mistakes. Which made me more anxious. The classroom activities were boring and fearful to me.

**I** : OK, so your teachers did not help you to learn that much. Do you think that your second language learning has affected by the foreign language anxiety? and in what was your learning got affected?

**S** : But my class performance was not good as I always was so nervous and shy. Specially in Presentation and individual participation. Up to high school, I did not need to use English to communicate with others. But in University I had to speak in English frequently. It was most challenging as the teachers took classes in English. Still I was thinking about grammars and sentence mistake. I felt embarrassed when teachers or peers corrected me.

But in Australia I have found more friendly Environment then Bangladesh. I was so shy in class here and never asked any question. though I did not understand that. I seldom interacted with others as it is an English-speaking Environment. But my classmates' teachers are so friendly and people here never look for the mistake or accent. this thing encourages me to improve my speaking.

*(The participant was talking non-stop here and covers the following questions-*

*-In your opinion, what are the factors that arise foreign language anxiety?*

*-Would you mind to share the effects of foreign language anxiety in your learning in the both context in Australia and Bangladesh? The interviewee was smiling and listening carefully.)*

**I** : Oh! sorry to hear so. But does your foreign language anxiety remain same or it is lessening now as you are in second semester? Can you please explain in details?

**S** : No, it is decreasing day by day. When I admitted to university in my country, I started watching English movie and listen to English songs. It improved my speaking and listening a lot. I was familiar with different accent and pronunciation of native speaker. I started to participate in presentation though I memorized before presentation. There was one teacher in my country who encouraged me a lot to speak in English. my speaking was improving from that time. When I'm in Australia, I got more space to practice my speaking. Different class Activities group work discussion presentation friendly Environment made me more confidant and decrease my anxiety. im confidant now than being in my country. it is really amazing to live in an English-speaking country to improve speaking.

**I** : Wow. That's the achievement. I am really happy to know that.

So, do you have any Recommendation for others to lessen up their foreign language anxiety?

**S** : Well, self-motivation, friendly and less stressed learning environment, interesting and engaging materials and activities are need for language learning. Also, flexible teaching style and feedback supports the learners to learn second or foreign language.

**I** : Thank you so much. Good Luck.

**S** : Thank you too.