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Fear of Negative Evaluation in Second Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have found that second language learning can be a traumatic experience for certain students (Zheng, 2008). This feeling is often related to many sources such as language proficiency, language difficulties and fear of negative evaluation from both peers as well as language lecturers. Watson & Friend (1969) define fear of negative evaluation as apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and expectation that others would evaluate them negatively. As evaluation on each other is very common in second language class, the students feel uncomfortable when they think that they are being watched by both lecturer and other students (Zhao Na, 2007) thus making them feel more insecure and unable to perform well in class. This paper is conducted to determine the fear of negative evaluation level of second language learner in Universiti Teknologi MARA Seri Iskandar, Perak. A total of 56 respondents were chosen from English language classes. The instrument used was a set of questionnaire adapted from the measurement scale of anxiety called the Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by Horwitz (1983). The data obtained from this study were analyzed using SPSS version 16.0. This paper will discuss the findings and recommendations.

Keyword: Fear, Evaluation, Anxiety, Second Language Learning, Apprehension

Introduction

The issue of anxiety in language learning has been widely recognized for its significant impacts on language learners. According to Zheng (2008), among all the learning disabilities, anxiety and fear have

become the major factors in determining the successful of second language learning. Additionally, anxiety has also become a factor that determines the level of comprehensible input received from the environment. As stated by Krashen (1982), the successful of language acquisition depends on whether the students are able to receive input under certain condition. Since anxiety restrains students from receiving the comprehensible input, it can be concluded that students would not be able to both acquire and learn the language, hence causing poor language performance and achievement. Therefore, it is very important to determine the level of anxiety that can hamper second language learning. This includes fear of negative evaluation that is proven to be one of the prominent factors that contribute to the feeling of anxiety in second language learning.

The fear of negative evaluation factor indicates that the students in language class are afraid to receive negative feedbacks not only from other classmates but also from the lecturers or instructors (Watson & Friends, 1969). This leads to the feelings of being afraid of making mistakes as well as trying to maintain their faces in front of their classmates and instructors. As stated by Price (1991), evaluation from others in class especially teachers and peers is the reason of why language learners feel uncomfortable to perform in class. The feeling of being watched by others makes them feel more insecure and unable to perform well in class. Even in a small group, learners might feel anxious for fear of negative evaluation from their peers resulting in being quite and reticent (Ohata, 2005). At the same time, they are trying to avoid face threatening situations in a language class since fear of negative evaluation is basically revolved around error corrections (Von Worde, 2003). As a result, students become more and more frustrated especially when the error corrections are done before they have time to completely formulate a response. Apart from that, interruptions from error corrections are also causing learners to lose their focus in formulating answers (McIntyre and Gardner, 1991).

Objective

To identify the fear of negative evaluation level of UiTM students in learning a second language.

Literature Review

Second Language Learners

Human are all born with the natural ability to learn a language even without proper instruction or formal exposure to the rules and forms (Chomsky, 1965). This is how people learn their first language. In Malaysia, English language is considered as the second language where all Malaysian are formally exposed to the language starting from primary school level. Despite the fact that first language of students in Malaysia is different according to their race, the second language of the Malaysian students will always be English. The importance of English as second language has later become more pronounced when English is still being taught up to the tertiary level. Besides that, the exposure of English can be seen everywhere all around Malaysia where fields like advertisement and entertainment are using English as the medium. In short, it can be concluded that besides Bahasa Melayu, Malaysian students have been familiarized by the use of English where the sources of input can be easily accessible.

Sources of Language Anxiety

There are several important sources of anxiety in language learning. According to Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986), the sources of language anxiety are the basis of formulating the three major factors that contribute to the feeling of anxiety in language learning. The three major factors are 1) Communication Apprehension, 2) Fear of Negative Evaluation, 3) Test Anxiety/ General Feeling of Anxiety. However, many studies all around the world have addressed the third factor as General Feeling of Anxiety only. This includes study by Casado & Dereshiwsky (2004).

According to Young (1991), anxiety in language learning revolves around three main aspects which are the learners, teachers/instructors and the instructional practice. From these aspects, Young has identified six potential sources of language anxiety which are 1) Personal and interpersonal anxiety, 2) Learner beliefs

about language teaching, 3) Instructor beliefs about language teaching, 4) Instructor-Learner actions, 5) Classroom procedure and lastly 6) Language testing. Ohata (2005) later concludes them as three issues which include 1) Socio-psychological issue of language anxiety, 2) Learner/Instructor beliefs on language learning and teaching and 3) Instructor-Learner interactions/classroom procedures

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Watson & Friend (1969) define fear of negative evaluation as ‘apprehension about others’ evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively’ (as cited in Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1991:31). As the evaluation on each other is very common in second language classes, the students feel uncomfortable when they think that they are being watched by both teacher and other students (Price, 1991; Zhao Na, 2007). The feeling of being watched by others makes them feel more insecure and unable to perform well in class. Even in a small group, learners feel more anxious for fear of negative evaluation from their peers and thus making them to be more quite and reticent (Ohata, 2005).

Von Worde (2003) in her research found that the students were very sensitive toward teacher’s evaluations especially regarding their speaking skill. Teachers in language classes sometimes ignore the fact that the students will probably feel uncomfortable in class due to the techniques of teaching. Von Worde claims that most of the students in language classes feel humiliated if they were being called in the class. According to many students, the most disturbing aspect in the foreign language class was directly related to the idea that; ‘the teacher was trying to make you feel stupid’. A few of them even seemed to project negative thoughts toward their teacher. This is also similar to the findings from the interviews with some of the highly anxious students by Price (1991). Price in her study also found out that the role of language instructors is very significant in class.

Another aspect in fear of negative evaluation is the error correction. According to Van Worde (2003) and Ohata (2005), some students become more frustrated when the teacher corrects the error before they have time to completely formulate a response. This interruption would frequently cause students to lose their focus while formulating their answers since they become very sensitive when it comes to error correction in front of their friends (McIntyre & Gardner, 1991). They tend to feel constantly being tested by teacher as well as perceive every correction as a sign of failure. Besides that, the students are also concerned about ‘making errors especially in pronunciation’ (Price, 1991:105). This is due to the fact that they were afraid to be laugh at whenever they mispronounced some words (Aydin, 2004).

Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1991) reported that students are very self-conscious when they are required to engage in classroom activities especially speaking. These kinds of activities expose their inadequacies and this feeling often leads to fear or even panic. In a second language class, speaking activity is very important to ensure that the students really learn the language (Zheng, 2008). However, most of the speaking activities in second language classroom unconsciously promote the environment of evaluating each others’ proficiencies that soon leads to the feeling of anxiety (Zhao Na, 2007). Since second language learning is different from the first language (Lightbown and Spada, 1999), students tend to be very careful and become more alert on the mistakes they might do. Besides that, they also feel intimidated when others speak better than they do. This is related to the role of speaker’s beliefs (Price,1991). Price’s study suggests that these beliefs actually became the potential sources of anxiety when some students believe that their language skills are weaker than the others.

Methodology

Respondents

The respondents of this study are 56 UiTM students who enrolled in English language classes. The respondents were taken from two levels of English classes which are semester 1 and semester 2. The

respondents were also taken from various faculties in University Teknologi MARA, Perak such as Faculty of Accountancy, Faculty of Business and Management as well as Faculty of Architecture, Planning and Surveying. For all the English classes taken, students are required to sit for final examination at the end of the semester. Besides the final examination, the UiTM students are also evaluated with five types of evaluation throughout the semester which are speaking, listening, grammar, reading and writing. As for the final exam, only reading and writing were evaluated.

The respondents involved in this study are 34 female and 22 male students. It is compulsory for all students to enroll in the English classes for the purpose to fulfill the university course requirement.

Instrument/Data Analysis

This study utilized the quantitative research methodology where the instrument used to collect the data was in a questionnaire form. The questionnaire was adapted from the measurement scale of foreign language anxiety called FLACS (Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale) introduced by Horwitz (1983). The FLACS was used to determine the fear of negative evaluation level for the respondents.

Researchers all around the world have proven that FLACS is relevant to be used in order to determine the anxiety level for second language learning as well. This is due to the reliability of the questionnaires to be used in all language learning. This is supported by studies conducted by Kondo and Yang (2004) who had used FLACS to determine the anxiety level in second language learning.

The questionnaire consists of two different sections which are; Section A for Personal details and Section B for fear of negative evaluation factors. The questionnaire was presented in two versions which were English and Bahasa Malaysia to assist respondents understanding of the items in the questionnaire. Respondents from this study were required to answer 11 items regarding their feelings of being evaluated by both peers and lecturer in class. The instrument consists of the five Likert Scales from 'Strongly Agree' (5), 'Agree' (4), 'Undecided' (3), 'Disagree' (2) and lastly 'Strongly Disagree' (1). The levels of anxiety for fear of negative evaluation are divided into two levels which are high and low. The low level of anxiety is determined from the mean value between 1.00 to 3.00 while the high level is taken from the range of 3.01 to 5.00. The data in this study were analyzed using Statistical package For Social Science (SPSS) software version 16.0 for frequency, percentage, and mean value.

Findings and Discussions

Table 1 Frequency and Percentage According to gender

Insert table 1 here.

Table 2 Students' Perception for Fear of Negative Evaluation

Insert table 2 here.

Table 3 Level of Anxiety for Fear of Negative Evaluation

Insert table 3 here.

Students' Perception

The results from the table 2 show that there are 11 items in fear of negative evaluation. From the table, it is found that the mean values for seven items are high. This indicates that students have high anxiety level in dealing with evaluation in class. There could be several explanations for this finding. It is a fact that language classes in UiTM revolves around many activities such as speaking, listening, writing and reading. From these activities, the students are likely to develop a sense of competitiveness among each other where it leads to frequently evaluating each other informally. Therefore, some students feel that they are being evaluated all the time especially by their peers in class.

It should be noted that some students do have the urge to compete with each other, thus resulting them to be more anxious about their performance in language class. Ohata (2005) in his study has found that the students themselves realize that they are competing with each other, thus making them become more aware of others' performances. This is where competitiveness emerges when students become too tensed and worried about their own performance especially in oral presentation or class discussion. Since UiTM students are required to take speaking test in the first three semesters, this undoubtedly creates the feeling of fear since the nature of the test is by doing group discussion where students need to respond to their peers' ideas and opinion. Thus, some might feel reluctant to speak since there might be other students who are more competent and tend to dominate the entire discussion. These findings are similar with Zhao Na's (2007) study on Chinese students. In her study, she found that most of the students feel anxious in class when they try to maintain their faces in front of others in class. The students do not like to receive low evaluations or criticism about themselves even though it is not openly or formally done in class.

Apart from that, some students might also feel fear of being addressed as less competent than others. Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1991) in their study suggest that students perceive their performance in class as a measurement to determine whether someone is clever or not. Therefore, they become more anxious when they try to appear to be perfect in every performance in class. They might still become anxious especially when they feel too afraid of making errors, thus continuously making errors during the process of learning. Even if they are quite competent, the fear of evaluation will somehow tamper with their true performance. This will undoubtedly become the source of depression that makes the students to lose their confidence on their own ability. This finding also agrees with Price's (1991) findings on the role of speakers' beliefs in class. Price with her interview with highly anxious student has found that most of the students perceive their language skills as weaker than the others. When the students have perception as such, they tend to feel fear of any kind of evaluation since they feel intimidated. This finding is also congruent with Aydin's (2004) study on evaluation from peers in class.

Level of Anxiety for Fear of Negative Evaluation

From the findings, it is found that majority of the students have high anxiety level with 58.93 percent. This indicates that most of the students are having problems in dealing with evaluation from others in class such as from peers and language lecturer. A possible explanation is that the students are worried about others' perception towards their performance in class. In certain situations, students tend to perceive themselves as less intelligent or smart as compared to the others in class. Therefore, they are most likely to feel scared and reluctant to get involved in any activities in class that has the potential to show how much they know about the language.

Another possible explanation for the high anxiety level is due to the instructors' role in class. As mentioned by Young (1991), language instructors play a very important role in determining the state of anxiety for students. Therefore, the students who have high anxiety level in fear of negative evaluation factor are likely to become anxious and afraid of their language instructors' reaction towards them. Some students might feel very scared to face evaluation from language instructors since they might be getting discrimination of treatment among them. This situation normally occurs in language classroom since it is in the nature of the class itself to have more interactions and thus might present a condition where students feel threatened by the errors correction or comments by lecturer. The students feel more frustrated especially when they are being corrected even before they have the chance to properly formulate the answers. Hence, some might take it as an embarrassing moment. However, there might also be a possibility that the comments given could be unsuitable to the students.

As for the low anxiety level, the findings also indicate that 41.07 percent of the students have low anxiety level in fear of negative evaluation. This might be due to the feeling of easiness while learning the language in class. Some of the students might feel less scared and worried since they are surrounded by their friends in class. Therefore, they perceive the situations in language classroom as less threatening due to the sense of belonging.

As mentioned by Krashen (1985) in the Affective Filter hypothesis, the affective filter can be lowered down if students consider themselves as a member of particular group. This is similar to claiming the group

membership with the sense of group belonging. Normally for these students, they are not afraid of getting evaluation from others nor do they feel too threatened to be evaluated by language instructors. This is due to the fact that other students in class are considered as 'in-group', therefore allowing them to be more open towards criticism. They feel less threatened by any types of evaluation in class.

Apart from that, the students might also have made some preparations beforehand that allow them to feel more confident whenever they are asked to present their answer in class. For these students, they might already become familiar with the format of evaluation in class since UiTM students are required to enroll in English language courses for the first three semesters thus allowing them to adopt the same strategies from the previous course. In this case, some students tend to adopt strategies to avoid getting negative evaluation from others. For example, the students might take extra time to search for correct answers and find more references to support their answers. This is supported by a study conducted by Kondo & Yang (2004) who found that students do adopt some coping strategies in order to avoid getting negative evaluation in class. Among the strategies are preparation, positive thinking and relaxation. Apart from that, there are also other students who treat the fear of getting evaluation as a part of motivational sources. As mentioned by Seiler (1996), some students who feel anxious in class have the tendency to try harder in order to avoid the feelings. As a result, they become more proficient with the language. This includes strategies like asking help from peers as well as lecturers.

Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that the second language lecturers play a very important role in determining the anxiety level of the students. Hence, the language lecturers should be more sensitive towards students' feelings while giving evaluations be it formal or informal since most of the students feel lack of confident and insecure while learning second language. Therefore, the lecturer should present their evaluation to the students in a very subtle manner as to avoid them from feeling more anxious and scared in class. Besides that, language lecturers are also responsible in choosing the right methods and techniques used in the class. They need to be more alert with students' learning preference to maximize the effectiveness of language teaching and learning. Few interesting activities that involve group interaction with less peers' evaluation and more on developing cooperation among members are highly recommended. This is to ensure the comfortableness of the students during the process of learning and acquiring the language where all students have the chance to contribute equally regardless of their differences in competency. Moreover, it is important for the lecturers to be more sensitive towards this issue, thus strive to create a non-threatening learning environment conducive for the students.

It is also found from this study that students suffer from the detrimental feeling of anxiety due to negative evaluation by peers while learning the language. The results from this study also show that the role of friends is also important in determining the anxiety level for students. Hence, it is crucial for the students to realize the impact of giving evaluation to others in class. In addition, students should be more supportive with each other during the learning process

Conclusion

The findings from this study show that majority of the students have high anxiety level in fear of negative evaluation factor. This highly indicates that anxiety still become one of the factor that hampers language learning. Anxiety in language learning is sometimes considered as trivial matter for some people. And yet, the consequences are far too apparent to be considered as unimportant. Thus, it is very crucial for language lecturers or instructors to be aware of all those factors especially the feeling of fear in evaluation. Since it is not possible to escape evaluations in language learning, students too have to be smart in dealing with fear such as adopting strategies and making preparation for English classes.

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Tables

Table 1 Frequency and percentage According to Gender

Gender	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Male	34	39.30
Female	22	60.70
Total	56	100

Table 2 Students' perception for Fear of Negative Evaluation

No	Item	SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean	Anxiety level
		1	2	3	4	5		
a1	I am worried about making mistakes in my English class.	1	11	4	29	11	3.68	High
		1.80%	19.60%	7.10%	51.80%	19.60%		
a2	I get upset when I do not understand what the lecturer is correcting.	2	9	10	24	11	3.59	High
		3.60%	16.10%	17.90%	42.90%	19.60%		
a3	I am usually not at ease during tests in my English class.	4	12	23	14	3	3.02	High
		7.10%	21.40%	41.07%	25%	5.40%		
a4	I am afraid that my lecturer is ready to correct every mistake I make.	11	16	8	17	4	2.77	Low
		19.60%	28.60%	14.30%	30.40%	7.10%		
a5	I am afraid to make grammar mistakes when I am speaking.	1	11	6	27	11	3.64	High
		1.80%	19.60%	10.70%	48.20%	19.60%		
a6	I am afraid when my lecturer calls me up to answer question in class.	7	20	10	12	7	2.84	Low
		12.50%	35.71%	17.86%	21.40%	12.50%		
a7	The more I practice in my English, the more confused I get.	17	23	10	4	2	2.11	Low
		30.40%	41.07%	17.86%	7.10%	3.60%		
a8	I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	0	5	14	29	8	3.70	High
		0	8.93%	25%	51.80%	14.30%		
a9	I am afraid that the students will laugh at me when I speak using English language.	3	17	13	14	9	3.14	High
		5.40%	30.36%	23.21%	25%	16.10%		
a10	I am afraid that they will	5	19	11	16	5	2.93	Low

	think that I am stupid.	8.90%	33.92%	19.64%	28.60%	8.90%		
all	I keep thinking that other students are better in English language than I am.	4	5	13	22	12	3.61	High
		7.14%	8.90%	23.20%	39.30%	21.40%		

Table 3 Level of Anxiety for Fear of Negative Evaluation level

Anxiety Factors	Level		Total
	Low	High	
Fear of Negative Evaluation	23 41.07%	33 58.93%	56 100.0%