

**LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND COPING STRATEGIES: STUDENTS OF
ENGLISH GENERIC COURSES IN UNIMAS**

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ABSTRACT

LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND COPING STRATEGIES: STUDENTS OF ENGLISH GENERIC COURSES IN UNIMAS

Tang Siew Kit

This study investigated the language anxiety level and coping strategies among the UNIMAS students of English generic courses. This study aimed to identify the most experienced anxiety type, the anxiety levels, and the most frequently used coping strategy. This study set out to find whether gender influenced the anxiety levels, and also whether the anxiety levels influenced the choices of the coping strategies. A self-rating questionnaire was used to probe levels of agreement pertaining language anxiety and coping strategies of 338 respondents, who were students from two classes for each of the seven English generic courses. The result showed that Communication Apprehension was the most experienced anxiety type whereas Preparation was the most frequently used coping strategy. 53.3% of the sample population came under low anxiety group. The result revealed that variable gender did not influence the anxiety levels of 114 males and 224 females. Both genders had the highest number in the low anxiety level, and the least number in the high anxiety level. However, the different generic courses influenced the anxiety levels of the students. There was no significant difference between the choices of coping strategies among the students with different anxiety level. Active coping strategies were preferred than emotion-related coping strategies by the respondents. The current study is unable to provide specific information about what language tasks had triggered the anxiety feeling. Therefore, future undertakings are suggested to focus on identifying language tasks that make students anxious to a degree that prohibits them from learning effectively.

ABSTRAK

KERESAHAN BAHASA DAN STRATEGI MENANGANI: PELAJAR-PELAJAR DALAM KELAS GENERIK BAHASA INGERIS DI UNIMAS

Tang Siew Kit

Kajian ini telah menyelidik keresahan bahasa dan strategi menangani di kalangan pelajar UNIMAS bagi kursus generik Bahasa Inggeris. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti jenis keresahan yang paling kerap dihadapi, tahap keresahan, dan strategi menangani yang paling kerap digunakan oleh pelajar-pelajar ini. Kajian ini juga mengenal pasti sama ada jantina telah mempengaruhi tahap keresahan, serta mencari sama ada pilihan strategi dipengaruhi oleh tahap keresahan. Soal kaji bentuk laporan diri berkaitan dengan keresahan bahasa dan strategi menangani telah diedarkan kepada 338 responden. Populasi sampel ini diperolehi daripada dua kelas daripada setiap kursus yang telah ditentukan secara rawak oleh penyelaras-penyelaras kursus generik. Keputusan menunjukkan Keresahan Komunikasi ialah keresahan yang paling kerap dihadapi manakala Persediaan ialah strategi yang paling kerap digunakan. 53.3% responden adalah kurang resah dalam kursus generik Bahasa Inggeris dan unsur jantina tidak mempengaruhi tahap keresahan pelajar. Keputusan juga menunjukkan tahap keresahan tidak mempengaruhi pilihan strategi menangani. Kajian ini tidak dapat memberi maklumat yang terperinci mengenai tugas yang mungkin menimbulkan keresahan. Dengan ini, kajian yang akan datang disyorkan mengkaji dan mengenal pasti tugas-tugas dalam kursus generik Bahasa Inggeris yang menimbulkan keresahan pelajar.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter overview

This first chapter discusses the background of the study, the problem statement, the research objectives and research questions, the significance of the study, the definition of terms and the scope of the study.

1.1 Background of study

Lim Soh Lan (1994) argues that English is not the language that is used by most communities in Malaysia because the communities choose the other common language to communicate with. Most students still cannot converse well in English even though they have learnt the language in the primary and secondary school. In fact, the teachers and students share the same mother tongue or are proficient in one common language. Most students treat English language as a subject to be studied and passed in an examination. Lim (1994) questions to what extent students see the relevance of English for communication.

In a study which involved 20 students in the examination of the ‘discourse organization’ in group presentations, Shahrina and Chong Su Li (2003) found that interest and enthusiasm in the ESL classroom is usually low due

to the lack of interest among the students. These students revealed that English to be of lesser importance in their lives because the immediate environment did not require them to use English and they preferred to communicate in their mother tongue. They argued that this lack of relevance brings about low motivation to learn the language.

The students' low interest and enthusiasm in English language learning will certainly result in problems in target language learning such as deficits in listening comprehension, reduced word production and impaired vocabulary learning. It is not surprising if these students score lower grades in the English language subject and lower scores in the standardized tests. According to Horwitz and Yong (cited in Kondo & Yang, 2004), these problems of language learning will create 'a state of apprehension, a vague fear' (p.258) in learners, which is anxiety in language learning. The kind of anxiety in the classroom is situational or state anxiety (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). In Kondo and Yang (2004), MacIntyre defines language anxiety as a situation-specific personality trait that has two psychological components: emotional arousal and negative self-related cognition.

Several studies have concluded that foreign language anxiety does have harmful effect on learning in the foreign language classroom. (Horwitz, 2001; Sparks & Ganschow, 2007; Worde, 2003). The same situations that affect negatively learning in the foreign classroom are present in the ESL classroom (Kondo & Yang, 2004; Pappamihel, 2002).

According to Pappamihel (2002), when learners see situations as threatening and unfavourable to them, they will doubt their own ability in performing tasks. This certainly evokes anxiety reactions towards learning. Thus it is harmful to learning because they do not perceive themselves as effective learners in taking advantage of learning opportunities. As a result, their

minds are preoccupied with the anxious feeling and they fail to concentrate fully on tasks.

This point of view is very much similar to Krashen's notion about affective filter as quoted by Buttaro (2002). Buttaro (2002) explains Krashen's affective filter as 'anxiety or blocks caused by an environment perceived as threatening' (p.84). According to Krashen, any intervention that reduces the fears connected to the environment will lower the affective filter and consequently improve chances for language acquisition.

In other words, anxiety is a complex concept that results from learners' feelings of self-efficacy as well as their perception of potential threats inherent in certain situations. Pappamihel (2002) elaborates that learners' fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, communication apprehension and threats to one's sense of self can increase the chances that a second language situation to be seen as threatening because they cannot see themselves as being able to overcome the perceived threats from their fears. They will find ways to deal with these feelings of inadequacy and helplessness. One of the most common strategies used is avoidance. They do not speak in the class. They withdraw interactions with peers and / or teachers because of anxiety.

Based on the view from Vygotsky and others, learning happens during the social interactions that occur in the classroom. In other words, learning will not take place if the learners withdraw themselves from the interaction during lesson due to high anxiety levels. This definitely leaves harmful effect on English language learning.

Many studies suggest cooperative learning activities such as pair work and group work to take the burden off the individual student to perform in front of the whole class, allowing greater student-student interaction. This will

reduce anxiety in the language classroom. (cited in Scarcella & Oxford 1992).

At present, there are not many studies about anxiety coping strategies. A study of this kind was conducted by Kondo and Yang (2004) on students of English in Japan. The strategies that apply to reduce the anxiety focus on cognitive, affective, and behavioral approaches. These three approaches provide the basis for considering the types of strategies that students use to cope with their language anxiety.

Those who believe anxiety stems from their cognition (worry, preoccupations and concerns) will change the negative thought and think it positively. Students who think that anxiety arises as a result of emotional arousal may take steps to reduce their bodily reactions and tension. Students will study harder to prepare before hand if they think that anxiety occurs because they lack the relevant skill. However, if the students are overwhelmed by anxiety, they may not take any effort to reduce the anxiety.

According to Kondo and Yang (2004), it is reasonable to assume that most students, irrespective of their anxiety level, will want to minimize the unpleasant anxiety feeling. Preparation was reported to be used more frequently than any other strategy. When students are motivated to reduce their anxiety, they are assumed to adopt those strategies they perceive to be most effective.

As quoted by Kondo and Yang (2004), Zeidner explains that active coping or problem-focused coping is preferred by most people, than either emotion-focused or avoidance-oriented coping.

1.2 Problem statement

Robin C. Scarcella and Rebecca L. Oxford (1992) describe dramatic but realistic of what sometimes happens in a traditional, teacher-centered classroom whereby learners only react to response to stimuli or instructions from the teacher. Learners are therefore aware of their own ignorance. They feel they will receive punishment or personal notice for making mistakes.

This is evident in the findings of Siti Nofishah Hj. Mohd. Zain (2005) where most students experienced communicative apprehension. The study on 61 participants of English for Social Purpose 1 in UNIMAS highlighted another important finding whereby a person is regarded as incompetent in the language if that person fails to perform well during the oral presentation. As a result, the participants resorted to keeping quiet, hoping that the instructor would not ask them questions. However, Siti Nofishah (2005) addressed the small population as insufficient to represent the whole population of UNIMAS students taking other English generic courses offered by the university.

The researcher replicated this study with a larger population, including students from other English generic courses and to find the anxiety level in the English generic courses. In addition, the purpose of this study was to conduct a wide-ranging investigation of language anxiety among UNIMAS students of English generic classes and their coping strategies. The study explored further on relationship between anxiety levels and coping strategies.

1.3 Aim and objectives of the study

In an investigation on English language anxiety among 178 Mexican immigrant students in ESL classes, Pappamihel (2002) concluded that there was a gender

difference in terms of anxiety level. Girls tended to be more anxious than boys. Similarly, Siti Norfishah (2005) reported that there was a gender difference in the anxiety levels, with 66.7% of female respondents very anxious compared to only 20% of male respondents.

It is therefore hypothesized that there is a gender influence in the anxiety level among students of English generic classes in the current study, with female participants more anxious than their male counterparts. Although there is no well-articulated theoretical view asserting that there is a gender difference in terms of language anxiety in the ESL classroom, a few studies suggest that this may be the case (Pappamihel, 2001; Pappamihel, 2002; Siti Norfishah, 2005).

Contrary to this view, anxiety is not necessarily portrayed by females because there is evidence to show that females tend to have closer interpersonal relationships with the teacher (Bracken & Crain, cited in Pappamihel, 2001) and that helps alleviate anxiety in the ESL classroom. Furthermore, feeling like anxiety may vary due to the personal characteristics of the participants, as well as their educational and family background. Thus, the hypothesis stating females are more anxious than males may not be evident in this study.

This study was guided by several objectives. The objectives of this study were to find out:

1. the anxiety type that most participants of English generic courses experience.
2. the anxiety level of these course participants
3. the gender influences in the anxiety levels.
4. the category of strategies that is most frequently used to cope with language anxiety.

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. Which of the three types of anxiety do most English generic course participants' experience?
2. What is the level of the students' language anxiety?
3. Is there any influence of gender in relation to the anxiety level?
4. Which of the five strategy categories is most frequently used by the participants to cope with language anxiety?

1.4 Significance of the study

The result of this study provided some information about the language anxiety experienced by learners enrolling for the courses. The provision of such information could help the instructors improve the classroom climate and encourage cooperative learning in the classroom.

The findings of the study could serve as a basis for the respective course developers to review the course materials as well as the nature of assessments for the generic courses whether the materials or assessments have been provoking which directly reduces participation and creates overt avoidance of the language. The respective course developers may consider more lead-in activities to guide learners in accomplishing the tasks without too much frustrations and worries. Moreover, the review of materials and learning tasks will reinforce the quality assurance of the English generic courses, ensuring the course contents are of quality, thus able to elicit the learning outcomes predetermined in the course outlines.

1.5 Operational definition of terms

1.5.1 Language anxiety

In this study, the respondents rated 20 statements in Part 2 of the questionnaire about their thought and feeling of vague fear while learning in the English generic courses. The scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The 20 statements recorded their opinion towards three aspects in language anxiety: Communication Apprehension, Test Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation. The scores in Part 2 were used to categorize the said aspects of language anxiety, using the **Compute** command in the statistical analysis package, SPSS. For the purpose of this study, the type of anxiety that most respondents experienced was identified.

Communication Apprehension refers to the feeling of fear that refrains learners from communicating with other people. In short, learners who experience communication apprehension are in hesitation to express their thoughts and ideas fluently. Items that reflected the communication apprehension were Item 2, Item 5, Item 7, Item 9, Item 11, Item 13, Item 16, and Item 19, e.g. ‘In generic class, I tremble knowing that I am going to have to speak in English’ and ‘In generic class, sometimes I can’t express my true feelings in English and this makes me uncomfortable’.

Fear of Negative Evaluation refers to the fear of taking evaluations made by other classmates and instructor about their performance and competence in the language. Items that showed this type of language anxiety were Item 3, Item 4, Item 14, and Item 17. Typical items were ‘In generic class, I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak’ and ‘In generic class, I am afraid that my lecturer is ready to correct every mistake I make’.

Test Anxiety refers to the students' perception of their abilities to accomplish the learning tasks or test. Items that were grouped under this category were Item 1, Item 6, Item 8, Item 10, Item 12, Item 15, Item 18, and Item 20. Typical items were 'In generic class, the more I study for a language test, the more confused I get' and 'There are so many rules in English language learning and I feel like I can't learn them all'.

1.5.2 Anxiety level

In addition, this study set out to find the anxiety level of the respondents. This was measured by adding together the scores of the self-report items in Part 2 of the questionnaire. The overall score was broken down into three categories: low level (38–48), moderate level (49–59) and high level (60–71). The higher the score, the higher the anxiety level, which means, if a respondent scored high this indicates he/she experienced higher anxiety level.

1.5.3 Gender

For the purpose of this study, gender differences referred to the sex of the respondents of English generic classes, male or female, in order to make the comparison among them in investigating whether language anxiety in English generic classes is influenced by gender of the participants.

1.5.4 Coping strategies

Strategies that students of English generic classes used to cope with their language anxiety. These strategies were worded in the 24 statements in the Part 3 in the questionnaire. These tactics were put into five categories i.e. Preparation, Relaxation, Positive Thinking, Peer Seeking and Resignation.

The scores of these statements were added and grouped accordingly using the **Compute** command in the SPSS.

Preparation is the behavioral strategy that relates to effective performance in the class. Individual items in Part 3 of questionnaire were Item 2, Item 5, Item 7, Item 12, Item 16, Item 18, and Item 19. Typical items were ‘I practice English in my mind’ and ‘I try to read carefully’.

Relaxation refers to affective quality that aims to lessen bodily tension associated with emotional arousal. Items that were grouped under Relaxation were Item 3, Item 4, Item 13, and Item 22. Typical items were ‘I take a deep breath and try to relax’ and ‘I touch my hair and play with my hands’.

Positive Thinking and Peer Seeking are cognitive attempts to control problematic thought processes related to language learning. In Positive Thinking, students shift attention from stressful situation to positive and pleasant cues. Items that showed Positive Thinking are Item 8, Item 9, Item 11, Item 14, Item 23, and Item 24. Typical items were ‘I tell myself that even if I am poor at English, I am good at other subjects’ and ‘I tell myself that mistakes are good because I can learn from them’.

On the other hand, Peer Seeking means students’ willingness to look for other students who seem to have trouble understanding the class. This will bring relief to the anxious students that others are having the same problem. Items that fell under this category were Item 6, Item 17 and, Item 21, e.g. ‘I tell myself that difficult problems for me are also difficult for the others’ and ‘I tell myself that the others must also be anxious’.

Resignation refers to students' reluctance to do anything to reduce their fear or anxiety. Items that were included into Resignation were Item 1, Item 10, Item 15, and Item 20. Typical items were 'I give up' and 'I accept the situation'.

1.5.5 English generic courses

All UNIMAS undergraduates need to register a minimum of two English generic courses or a maximum of four English generic courses in order to fulfill the requirement upon completion of their studies in the campus.

For those undergraduates who had scored Band 3 and below in their Malaysian University English Test (MUET), they need to enroll two compulsory English generic courses, English Preparatory 1 and English Preparatory 2 before enrolling themselves for any other English generic courses. By the end of their studies, these undergraduates will have taken four English generic courses.

On the other hand, undergraduates with MUET Band 4 and above are required to take only two English generic courses, fulfilling the minimum requirement. They do not have to take both English Preparatory 1 and English Preparatory 2. There are seven English generic courses offered in UNIMAS:

- a. English for Self Expression
- b. English for Real World
- c. Academic Reading and Writing
- d. Creative Writing
- e. English for Professional Purposes
- f. English Preparatory 1

g. English Preparatory 2

1.6 Scope of the study

This study attempted to find the anxiety type that most students of English generic courses experienced and the anxiety level of these students. This study identified whether there was a gender difference in relation to the anxiety level in the English generic classrooms. In addition, this study aimed to identify the most frequent category of strategies applied by the students in reducing their anxiety in the English generic classrooms, ranging from Preparation, Relaxation, Positive Thinking, Peer Seeking or Resignation.

However, this study did not examine the relation between the MUET result and the language anxiety. The study did not compare the level of anxiety between undergraduates with MUET Band 3 and below with those with Band 4 and above. It was not the scope of this study to find the learning tasks of the English generic courses that had made them nervous, e.g. the role play, short stories writing, interviews or other writing assignments. This study did not predict the achievement of the students in their respective classes based on their anxiety level.

Furthermore, this study did not develop a typology on the coping strategies by the students of the English generic courses. The findings reflected the most frequent category of strategies used by the students. The basic strategies used in the questionnaire of this study were adapted from the list developed by Kondo and Yang (2004).