

The Impact of Anxiety on English Language Learning: the Case of Bahraini University Students

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims at identifying the impact of anxiety on English language learning in Bahrain. The selection of university students in Bahrain was due to the fact that it has been observed that most of them try to study in Arabic, knowing that in Bahrain English is considered as a second language and students start studying it from primary school. Also, it has been observed that students tend to score less in English language classes and that impacts their GPA negatively. To collect data we sought to apply the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) that was designed by Horwitz et al. (1986). 90 Bahraini undergraduate students participated in the study. The sample was conveniently selected from Gulf University in Bahrain. Data was analyzed qualitatively using percentages. The results showed that anxiety is a major factor that affects students' performance in English language classes. At the end of the article some suggestions were provided.

Keywords: Anxiety, English Language, Bahrain;

1. English language in Bahrain

The Kingdom of Bahrain had a long political and trade history with Britain. English was a vital medium that allowed both nations to communicate and especially flourish economically. Even if the Kingdom of Bahrain is considered as the smallest country in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) that has the lowest population, the country aims at having a strong educational system and that is influenced in its 2030 vision that aims at having Bahrain as the hub of Higher Education in the GCC. For this reason, English (be it a lingua-franca) is an integral component of the Bahraini educational system and is now taught from the first year of schooling. In most higher education institutions the medium of instruction has become English and this is due to the high scientific status that the language has, and its impact on the country's economic and future success. As mentioned before, English in Bahrain is taught in primary, secondary, high schools, and higher education. This paper will mainly focus on its status in the latter. Arabic is the official language in many higher education institutions in Bahrain. However, many technical and medical colleges have English as their official language (QAAET 2010). For this reason, many students tend to choose to study humanities since their English language level is not high. Also, it has been stated by the World Bank in 2008 that the majority of Bahrainis choose to study Education, Humanities and Social Sciences (60%) as opposed to Medicine, Science, Engineering, and other technical subjects (25.1%). Also, most of the institutions require a certain level in English and if students do not meet the requirements they have to take foundation classes. All this, is to show that the English language has gained an important status in the educational system in Bahrain.

2. Studies on anxiety in the context of education

Anxiety is defined as: 'the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system' (Horwitz et al. 1986). This paper aims at defining anxiety as far as the educational field is concerned. Students feeling anxious in a language classroom do not feel secure; they are not comfortable in a language classroom. Moreover, they never take risks and voice their concerns in front of their classmates. They do not participate since they feel that all people may laugh at them or throw nasty comments. In class discussions, they are afraid of making mistakes, at all language levels, and they prefer to keep silent instead of being active participants. In foreign language learning the affective variable has a tremendous influence. Students come to language classes from different backgrounds, some of them may come with preconceived ideas about the language, and others may have positive or negative attitudes towards the language due to political, historical, or cultural factors. One of the common affective variables is anxiety. It affects students throughout the learning process and this results in poor performance throughout the learning process (Krashen, 1981). Anxiety stems from the individual's own self, his/her attitude or beliefs towards the foreign or second language, his/her perceptions of his/her teachers, peers, and the environment of teaching and learning in general. Language anxiety may be a result as well as a cause

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of insufficient command of the target language (Sparks and Ganschow; cited in Horwitz, 2001: 118). Students who face problems while learning a language activate their affective filter and become anxious.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Population

The population of this study consists of undergraduate students from Gulf University- Kingdom of Bahrain. This was a convenient choice since I am teaching at that university and I have been able to observe students while learning the English language. Most of the students have been studying English for more than seven years but still they were facing major problems since most of them did not have good command of the language. The study aims at extracting information about why the students had such problems and why they feel resentment when they have English language classes or even content-based classes in the English language.

3.2 Design

This descriptive study used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Test (FLCAT) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). It is a five point Likert scale questionnaire that consists of 33 items. The FLCAS has been used in different studies (Aida, 1994; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Cheng et al., 1999; Horwitz et al., 1986; Matsuda & Gobel, 2001; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Saito et al., 1999). Among these studies, Horwitz et al. and Aida reported both a high internal reliability and a test-retest reliability of FLCAS. Considering the validity of the FLCAS, Aida's (1994) factor analysis showed that most of the items had high factor loadings, and only three items did not load. We can conclude that this questionnaire is valid in general.

4. Presentation of results

Statements	SA	A	N	D	SD
I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.	30	25	15	11	9
I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.	18	20	15	25	12
I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	9	10	6	34	31
It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.	23	12	30	19	6
It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.	36	29	10	11	4
During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course	5	10	15	45	15
I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.	28	33	8	14	7
I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.	14	22	39	10	5
I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.	35	32	3	20	0
I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.	24	24	19	12	11
I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.	15	10	22	30	14
In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	3	12	25	38	12
It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	22	35	26	13	4
I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.	0	10	9	46	35
I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting	29	37	16	11	7
Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel	16	17	24	19	14



anxious about it.					
I often feel like not going to my language class	3	5	10	46	26
I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.	15	25	15	33	2
I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	20	28	32	7	3
I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.	17	25	23	23	2
The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.	17	10	33	21	9
I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.	21	23	18	23	5
I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	16	32	19	20	3
I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.	35	23	16	10	6
Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	8	14	29	32	7
I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.	10	4	25	23	28
I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	18	28	20	23	1
When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	32	24	18	10	6
I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	3	10	15	25	37
I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.	17	13	23	18	19
I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.	25	23	18	20	4
I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.	1	9	21	35	24
I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	17	22	31	10	10

Table 1: number of the students who opted for each choice of each item in the FLCAT

5. Findings

The research findings were as follows:

- a. The majority of students feel anxious about their language classes.
- b. A great number of students experience peer pressure in language classes and this leads to their inhibition and thus their inability to perform well in the classroom.
- c. Most students feel that the English language is a burden and that they need to pass it regardless of the score they get.
- d. Students will not feel comfortable around a native speaker since they feel that they may not understand him/her.
- e. Students feel nervous when they have to talk inside the classroom without prior preparation.
- f. As far as exams are concerned students feel anxious because they feel that they may not understand the questions and this will lead to not even answering properly.
- g. Students may not prepare well for exam because of overthinking. Their affective filter is so high and they can not concentrate well.
- h. During English cases students try to concentrate and give importance to what the professor and their classmates are saying.
- i. Students get nervous when they know that their professor is ready to correct every single mistake.
- j. Students have apprehension towards the memorization of grammatical rules. Thus makes them anxious and not willing to learn the language.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

As mentioned in the sections before this was a preliminary study to understand why students face problems in English language classes. The results of the FLCAT showed that students once in language classrooms activate the affective factor and this hinders their learning. Also, it has been shown that anxiety led to many other problems especially during the period of exams since students' uncertainty prevented them from concentrating. This study gave insight to its researcher to finding new ways of teaching the English ways in a more innovative and interactive way so that we can lower the affective filter and make students more comfortable in the language classrooms.

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