



Anxiety in Learning a Second Language: In the Case of Kurdish Students in Kurdistan during Exams

Author: Seban Hussen Hag Ibrahim

Abstract

Anxiety has become a serious concern in second language learning over the past years and is an issue that triggers different views. Many researches were guided previously on different kinds of anxiety on students during examination and inside the classrooms. While no research is done on this issue in Kurdistan part of Iraq. For this reason, this study aims to examine factors that cause anxiety on students in a negative way. Semi-structured way of data collection used in this study based on Grounded Theory. Ten Participants were involved in this research. They were students of Fakhir Mergasouri international school located in Erbil of Iraq. Data were analyzed to discover the effect of anxiety on the overall performance of the student, after being collected in semi-structured process and through Grounded Theory. The finding of the study is that anxiety has a negative impact on students during examination period inside exam halls. The significance of the study is to help the student relieve and decrease the amount of anxiety.

Key words: Language anxiety, Anxiety theories, Exam anxiety.

1 Introduction

Everyone feels anxious from time to time for different reasons. It is a common feeling for people to feel nervous when they face a problem at work, when having a test, or when they take highly pivotal decisions. Anxiety is feeling distressed or having a mental tension due to many reasons like the fear of failure (Gilbert and Snyder).

Learning a second language can be stressful for many people. Second language learners who are still attached to their mother tongue find it difficult to acquire the second language that is odd to them. One of the most crucial obstacles that hinder learners to learn a second language effectively is Anxiety (Horwitz, 2001). However, the pressure on students at schools to do well in class and learn the second language, which is a required subject, causes sometimes traumatic effects. Fearing a negative evaluation from either their parents or their teachers, students feel stressed and sometimes frightened. As a result, they perform badly. Besides, pedagogues and parents who display a very high expectation to the students place an unbearable brunt on them which leads to anxiety. My aim is to know to what extent is the anxiety strong on the students and how to help the students learn the second language competently and with ease. Many researches attempted to find reasons and effects of anxiety on second language learners in schools but failed to find adequate solutions to it. This research paper attempts to fill this gap (Horwitz, 2001). Anxiety is a mental block that displays itself to various other issues that students deal with. (Buchler and Robin, 2013). Anxiety that is based in the language environment is associated with language acquisition whereas other types of anxiety would not have consistent relations to

performance. (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989). In the classroom, increasing levels of anxiety can create a plethora of negative impacts. Anxious students do not usually want to answer questions asked by instructors and do not participate in oral activities. Students also try to avoid hard linguistic structures that the relaxed ones would be willing to do. Therefore, anxiety from learning a second language has been correlated negatively with language test grades. Anxious students will sometimes say that language learning in the classroom goes quickly and they feel they are behind and cannot catch up (MacIntyre, Gardner, 1989). Another theory believes that language anxiety could play a pivotal role in creating individual differences in second language acquisition. We will argue that language anxiety is a under the type of specific anxiety and not a trait anxiety. Horwitz and Cope (1986) argued that a specific anxiety or Foreign Language Anxiety was responsible for students' uncomfortable or stressful experiences in learning a language. Therefore, they offered a scale to measure this type of anxiety and called Classroom Anxiety Scale. Findings about anxiety and achievement in a language have been showing a consistent negative link between achievement and anxiety. Sources of anxiety are multiple: some of them are caused by the pedagogues' beliefs and some by learners' beliefs. Other anxiety sources are from interaction between teachers of the language and students. (Young, 1991) Test anxiety results in poor performance. It is related to learners' or students' self-esteem. It is also related to their fears of teachers' negative assessment or evaluation (Hembree, 1988). Stowell and Dan (2010) set two exams: online one and another one in the exam hall. They found out that when students did online exam, they got better results than when they the exam they did in the exam hall (Stowell and Dan, 2010).

This study addresses the issue of how tests of English language affect students' performance in schools of Kurdistan due to their anxiety. The major goal of this paper is to see whether students who are tested very much get anxious and whether the anxiety they get from exams affects their performance negatively. This research is seeking to find answers for the following questions:

- 1- What are the impacts of exam anxiety on students' performance?
- 2- What are the students' views and reactions to exams?

2 Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study were a range of 10 EFL students from Fakhir Mergasoori International School (managed by SABIS) in Erbil, Iraq. Participants gender were four male students and six female students. Their grades were ranged between grade 9 to 11.

2.2 Procedure

A qualitative method of data collection is used in this study, which conducted a number of interviews with students to find out the effects of anxiety on their learning performance. The research seeks to show the factors that affect students' academic performance and behavior. The interviews took place at Fakhir Mergasoori International School (managed by SABIS) in two months in order to have a better balance in the collection of data.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

Collecting data started in late November, in the middle of first semester at Fakhir Mergasouri School that is really appreciable that the administration accepted my offer to interview the students. As final examination of first semester approached, students were busy studying. The researcher started interviewing right before the midterm exams start to get to a great conclusion.

Since exams approaches the level of anxiety goes up. Each interview lasted less than ten minutes. Students were asked to read and sign a consent paper provided by the researcher, in which, all the terms and details about the interview was written and explained to the students verbally. The names of the students were coded as a matter of confidentiality. All interviews were recorded using recording device.

data analysis started after all interviews transcribed. The collection of data was semi-structures through distributing interview. Then coding process and categorization started to analyze the responses of the participants and make a fruitful conclusion. Grounded Theory was used in he analysis of data.

2.3.1 Results

2.4 Test anxiety

To examine the negativity of anxiety on the academic performance of the students, participants were asked a plethora of questions about their exams and their anxiety at the time of examination. Most of the participant agreed that they get anxious at exam times and it affects them negatively. One of the students said:

Theme 1: Time Limitation during exams

Time limit of the tests might be an important factor of anxiety on the students. All students agreed that the time allocated for the exams is limited and not enough compared to the difficulty of the questions. For this reason, they feel anxious:

(St1): I hate exams. The minute I step inside the exam hall, my eyes are on the clock which makes me nervous and make mistakes. The clock hand runs so quickly and makes my heart pound fast.

(St7) The questions in the exam are too long and the answers are longer. Still, one minute is allocated for each question. This makes me rush in answering. (St5): The Language sub-subjects are difficult; the question guides provided by the teachers are extremely vague. I have so much work on my shoulder to do. (St2): The only thing that makes me uncomfortable when doing the tests is the time limit. I check time more than checking the questions, which makes me nervous most of the time.

(St8): I always leave the last question unanswered because time doesn't let me.

Theme 2: Exam atmosphere

The noise inside the exam hall, invigilators interruption from time to time, squeaky sounds of desks, and even noises from outside the hall might all increase the level of anxiety on the students. As some participants complained saying:

(St10): I get distracted very easily. Inside the exam hall, from time to time, teachers' instructions confuse me. Students ask questions loudly. I need a quiet place to answer.

(St6): The desks are terrible, proctors check us every time for not cheating. I can easily hear voices from outside that distract my attention.

(St3): I am not comfortable at all in the exam hall; I am worried if I even move a little, proctors will consider it an act of cheating.

One reason that increases the level of anxiety might be the exam environment.

Theme 3: Exam questions' format

Tests are designed for the students to evaluate their levels but in most of the international schools in Kurdistan this view is misunderstood. Here, tests are conducted for passing purposes rather assessing their understanding of their subjects. Some students claimed that they forget everything they learn after the exam which means they were barely memorizing to get high grades. The difficulty and ambiguity of the questions are also essential factors of anxiety.

One student stated:

(St1): I get scared form the exams. Last year I failed in writing skill just because of

I didn't understand the question correctly; it was misleading. I know my mistakes now but I failed. That's why I say exam scores are not fair. I am here to learn not for marks.

(St9) When I see other students handing their exams to the proctor, I feel I am behind although I am not. So, I start answering very fast and therefore I end up with many mistakes.

The criteria of the tests must reach all five core key components; practicality, reliability, validity, authenticity, and the teachers wash back so that the level fear and anxiety on the students hit the lowest level.

3 Summary of the Study

Anxiety undoubtedly exist and affects students either positively or negatively. When it comes to the learning process some sort of anxiety need to be stopped for the students to make improvement and successfully reach their goals. For this reason, the researcher conducted this study to examine student anxiety in the classrooms and during exams. Descriptive qualitative approach is used in this study. Grounded Theory is used for data collection. Data collection was semi-structured using interviews with 10 students from Fakhir Mergasouri international school.

4 Discussions of the Findings

This study determined causes and effects of test anxiety through interviews. Therefore, the sample findings have been generalized to populations in Kurdistan as conclusions. Variables had been studied within limited conditions. Main questions of this study are addressed and answered in this section as well as the summary of the key results with the provision of some interpretation of the findings. There is no difference between the male students and female one in having poor performance due to test anxiety. Test anxiety is related to fears of negative evaluation, and hate of tests. Students' self-esteem becomes low. Furthermore, they tend to feel anxious by outside circumstances. They also experience difficulty while learning. Exam anxiety can be lessened by a plethora of attitudinal and mental treatments. In reaching answers for the study's main questions, participants, high school male and female students all agreed that they have high level of anxiety during exam times. Some students mentioned that they have problems in time limitation in the exam. One student mentioned that questions are vague and she cannot always understand what they really want. Another student complained about the chaos in the exam hall: proctors' loud voice when instructing, sound of desks, noises from outside and many other distraction causes. He said he can not focus on the question because of the interruption of the proctors and the voices outside the hall. A student said that whatever he gets in the exam, it does not please his teacher. Therefore, he gets nervous in the exam.

As concluded from students' answers, it seems that time allocated for the exams is not adequate. Other students complained about the noises in the exam hall by the invigilators. Moreover, some students had grievances about the ambiguity and difficulty of the exam questions. All these reasons lead the students to make mistakes in questions they might know the answer in a better environment. That is why their anxiety is high. Hembree (1988) states that students get very low self-esteem when having high levels of anxiety. He continued to say

that students feel worry due to many circumstances surrounding the exam. Students have difficulty in the tests which affects their performance (Hembree, 1988). On the other hand, students viewpoint and reaction towards the exams is a very important point because it goes into the frame of learners belief; if the students believe that exam is a horrified part of their educational life then it will affect their performance; besides, learners' belief is a proven fact.

5 Study Limitations

Many limitations faced the researcher. One main limitation was the limited number of students. Secondly, the students were not free; they were either in the exam halls or studying for their exams. Another issue was the unavailability rooms for preparing a quiet atmosphere for both the interviewer and the interviewees to discuss well. Another issue was time limitation provided to the researcher since he had to finish the study in a short period of time. Moreover, the researcher himself was busy proctoring exams and marking essays.

6 Implications and Further Study

This research paper promoted some important themes that might possibly decrease the negative level of anxiety. Researcher's implication for further study on this topic might be the theme of test anxiety on students that negatively affect the students' performances. Evident example of this issue is the students' response on their exam and their academic results. This research is significant since it addresses the main causes of anxiety on students and how test anxiety leads to low marks, bad performance, and low self-esteem. Moreover, it also proposes remedies to test anxiety. Involving more participants to find out more appropriate results and making the use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches might give the researcher more precise and accurate results.

7 Remedy

Assessments, which evaluate the students' understanding of the subject, might be more beneficial than testing in one session. Besides, setting new exam halls with cameras to decrease the number of proctors might be another remedy to decrease chaos in the exam hall and more importantly decrease the students' anxiety. Even online examination might be better than the conventional exam halls. Setting exams that test all the aspects of language rather than exams that test only Grammar or only vocabulary words might be beneficial.

References

- Charmaz, K (2003). Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analysis. In J. A. Holstein and J. F. Gubrium, J. F. (Eds.), *Inside interviewing: New lenses, new concerns* (311-330). Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Buchler, R. K. (2013). Anxiety-reducing strategies in the classroom.
- Harumi, I. (2002). A new framework of culture teaching for teaching English as a global language. *RELC journal*, 33(2), 36-57.
- MacIntyre, P. D. and Gardner, R. C. (1989), *Anxiety and Second-Language Learning: Toward a*

Theoretical Clarification. Language Learning, 39: 251–275. doi:10.1111/j.1467-1770.1989.tb00423.x

Macintyre, P. D. (1995), How Does Anxiety Affect Second Language Learning? A Reply to

Sparks and Ganschow. *The Modern Language Journal*, 79: 90–99.
doi:10.1111/j.15404781.1995.tb05418.x

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B. and Cope, J. (1986), Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, The Modern Language Journal, Vol. 70, No. 2 (summer, 1986), pp. 125-132 published by Wiley

Peter D. MacIntyre and R. C. Gardner, Investigating Language Class Anxiety Using the Focused Essay Technique: *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 75, No. 3 (Autumn, 1991), pp. 296-304

Young, D. J. (1991) *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 75, Creating a Low-Anxiety Classroom Environment: What Does Language Anxiety Research Suggest?

No. 4 (Winter, 1991), pp. 426-439

Stowell, J. R. & Dan, B. (2010)

Journal of Educational Computing Research, v42 n2 p161-171. Effects of Online Testing on Student

Exam Performance and Test Anxiety <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=anxiety+of+exams&id=EJ873597>

Hembree, R. (1988). Correlates, causes, effects, and treatment of test anxiety. *Review of educational research*, 58(1), 47-77.

Appendix:

Research's Interview Questions:

1. How do you feel before the exam and during the exam in the exam hall?
2. Are there any factors that confuse you in the exam and don't let you focus?
3. Do you know the correct answer of the questions you made mistakes in after the exam?
4. Do you feel the questions are too difficult or vague?
5. Is time allocated for the exam enough to answer all the questions?
6. Do you do better in online exams?
7. Does the language teacher get satisfied about your results?
8. Do you think of marks while you are in the exam?
9. Do you feel that the results you get do not reflect your language proficiency and skills? Why?
10. Do your parents get mad at you when they are not satisfied with your grades?