Gender and Anxiety Among International High School Second Language Learners

Roberto L. Torres
Texas A&M University – Kingsville

Abstract

Educational researchers have studied more the role of cognition on learning, paying less attention to affection. A comprehensive approach to learning includes affection as a factor of learning, something second language researchers have known about. By applying the English language anxiety scale (ELAS), this study investigated the language anxiety of international female and male English language learners in a bilingual high school. The study found that all participants suffer language anxiety regardless of age, gender, length of stay in the host country, and grade level. However, there was no statistical difference between the experienced language anxiety of females and males. One conclusion is that English language teachers learn about the affection-language learning process, about the connection between culture and language learning, and about how to engineer low stress classrooms. Further research should look into the role that prior use of English and formal ESL training has on language anxiety.

Introduction

Although theorists have considered that the learner’s triadic mind comprises cognition, conation, and affect, educational researchers have typically devoted more attention to investigating the role of cognition and associated psychological factors in learning (Snow, Corno, and Jackson, 1996). Nevertheless, a more reasonable view of learning is one that examines the roles of cognition, affect, and conation in the learning process. A language learning theory that includes the roles of all three dimensions better serves education as well as the educational process of second language learners.

In her literature review, Bailey (1983) considered anxiety to be an intrinsic learner psychological factor. Anxiety is an emotional state of apprehension or of a vague fear indirectly associated with something. Furthermore, Bailey mentioned that anxiety is a factor of the learner that influences learning and consists of the type of psychological state that deals with the emotional reactions and motivations of learners. Anxiety is a class name feeling, mood, temperament. It is a single feeling response to a particular object or idea; it is the general reaction toward something liked or disliked…the dynamic or essential quality of an emotion; the energy of an emotion (Snow, Corno, and Jackson, 1996).
Motivational theorists have defined anxiety as a drive with different levels of negative energy that impels learners to behave in a specific way (Graham & Weiner, 1996). Another definition describes anxiety as the individual's experience of feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry (Spielberger, 1972). For Santrock (2004) anxiety is a psychological state that includes a highly unpleasant feeling of fear and apprehension and appears in students learning content such as mathematics, among others (De Corte, Greer, & Verschaffel, 1996).

Brown (2000) mentioned that although the construct is elusive, anxiety is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry, and that teachers should try to establish whether a learner's anxiety is situational or global because of its impact on the learning process. Brown classified anxiety as a tension that is either debilitative or facilitative. Debilitative anxiety is the type of tension that is perceived as negative and is to be avoided at all costs because of its association with bad feelings and because it can hinder learning. Learners experiencing debilitative anxiety tend to flee from learning situations or tasks. In contrast, facilitative anxiety is an affective state that helps the learner to accomplish a task. Applied to language learning, facilitative anxiety it is a positive psycho-emotive state that includes the precise levels of tension that directs learners to engage in the L2 learning process. Facilitative anxiety equips the learner with the right amount of energy to properly face, not avoid, the learning tasks.

Language Anxiety

Second language theorists have acknowledged the important role of anxiety in the language learning process of children, teenagers, and adult second language learners. They have recognized that every second language learner suffers some form of anxiety regardless of age and experience with language and the type of language learning setting and location, including EFL, ESL, and pronunciation (Pappamihiel, 2001; Ortega, 2005; Chao, 2003; Tsai, 2003). Researchers have construed language anxiety as a situation specific anxiety (Horwitz, 2001). The construct refers to the subjective uneasiness, nervousness, apprehension, and worry experienced by second language learners who are required to use the second language in identifiable conditions like public speaking or classroom discussions (Ellis, 1994). It is essential to note that the construct references the learner's subjective perception, evaluation, and experience of the language learning situation. This means that language learning has a subjective component to it, it is subjective, and that language learners differ in the level of anxiety based on factors such as age, knowledge of the language, and on the individual's culture, among others (Horwitz, 2001).

According to Ortega Cebreros (2005), the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was designed to evaluate students’ subjective experience of anxiety related to learning a foreign language. The FLCAS measures three interconnected factors present in the language learning environment: a) fear of negative evaluation, b) test anxiety, and c) communication apprehension (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986). Since then, researchers have translated the FLCAS to Taiwanese and Spanish and extensively used it when doing research in Taiwan and in Spanish speaking countries. Additional research efforts have
resulted in related language anxiety scales such as the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRS) (Saito, Garza, & Horwitz, 1999).

A more recent development is the English Language Anxiety Scale (ELAS) (Pappamihiel, 2001), the instrument of choice in the present study, described below. The ELAS is a survey for Spanish native speakers who are acquiring English as a second language in the larger sociolinguistic context where it is used, not in their original countries and cultures. In its original form it is scale that probes the level of agreement-disagreement of participants with statements scored from 1 – 5, including a neutral option. Each item probes learner anxiety levels in ESL and mainstream classrooms, resulting in that each participant answers 40 test items, twenty for each classroom setting and language and in each language. The survey includes the three performance anxieties of language learning outlined by Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope (1986) previously mentioned. An innovation of the ELAS is the inclusion of two items that measure identity. The survey also scrutinizes the background of the participants in terms time of residence in the U.S. and knowledge of and experience with English. The survey showed an internal consistency reliability on Cronbach’s alpha test of .89 (Pappamihiel 2001, 2002).

This account evidences that the relation between anxiety and learning has been a theme of interest to researchers concerned with second language learning. The authors cited evidence how affective variables impact cognition and behaviors associated with the learning process.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and compare the language anxiety as measured by the ELAS of female and male English language learners enrolled in a bilingual high school in Texas. The study explored the similarities and/or differences of language anxiety between the international female and male high school English language learners.

Participants

This study was conducted in a college preparatory school located in the rural areas of south Texas, near the Mexican border. The ELAS was administered to sixty students: twenty nine (49%) females and thirty (51%) males. Thirteen participants were ninth grade students (22%) comprised by four females and nine males; twenty-three participants (38%) were tenth grade students, of which ten were females, and thirteen were males; and there were twenty-four eleventh grade students (40%), including sixteen females and eight males. Prior to administering the ELAS, teachers explained the purpose of the study to the students; afterwards, they administered the ELAS during class time. In this study only the twenty English survey items of the ELAS were used to assess anxiety.

Analysis

The researcher used the Chi square test was used to establish if there were significant difference levels of anxiety between male and female students, and a p < .05 as the level of significance. Examining the survey results with the Chi square statistical analysis
showed that the measure of language anxiety experienced by the participants of this study was comparable. As expected, the female and male participants of the study reported experiencing language anxiety in both ESL and regular classrooms where English is the primary language of instruction. These results are consistent with previous similar studies (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Horwitz, 2001; Ortega, 2005; Pappamihiel 2001, 2002), but unlike some of these studies, the measurement of language anxiety of the males and females did not show any significant statistical differences. In this study, while the mean score of male students was 2.578 and a standard deviation of 1.1076, the female students averaged 2.581 and a standard deviation of 1.397. These obtained group averages reflect that students were at a midpoint between experiencing a high level of language anxiety and not experiencing any language anxiety at all in either ESL or mainstream classrooms where English was the language for instruction.

**Discussion**

When one considers the students’ experiences with English before entering the high school bilingual program, one can expect language anxiety to be affected by exposure to and experience with the target language. That is, the use of English use at home and prior English instruction may have worked to abate learner language anxiety. It also seems that the length of time students had been in the country prior to being surveyed may have tempered their anxiety. While most students had been in the U.S. between 6 months and 5 years, some eleventh grade students had been in the country for up to 7 and 9 years. The time factor may have affected anxiety because of students’ exposure to the constant flow of English language and to numerous and varied forms of language interactions for language use. Over time, students may have already developed a comfort zone that allowed them to experience less anxiety when surveyed.

From the students’ experiential perspective, one possible explanation of the obtained measures of language anxiety is that almost eighty percent of the participants had prior experience with English in their countries of origin. These experiences included either speaking with brothers or sisters, and with some adults. Most participants had used English at home with a sibling; one student spoke English with a parent, another with an uncle. In addition, all ninth graders and most tenth-grade student, and four eleventh graders reported having studied English in the homeland before coming to the U.S. In all, combined with length of stay in the U.S., previous language use may also be factored into the measured anxiety of participants.

Evidence of the potential effect of previous language use on reduced language anxiety can be inferred from students when asked, “In general, how do you feel when you speak in English in your ESL classes?” In response, eight ninth graders (62%) described themselves as feeling comfortable, while five students (38%) mentioned feeling a little nervous. Eighteen tenth graders (78%) felt comfortable when speaking English, five (22%) felt a little nervous. Thirteen eleventh grade students (57%) felt comfortable speaking English in ESL class and ten (43%) felt nervous; one student did not respond this item. On the average, two thirds of students (66%) already felt comfortable speaking English in their classes when surveyed, leaving only one third (34%) feeling a little nervous. Additionally,
when asked, “How well do you speak English?” most students rated themselves as either very good or good speakers of English. Nine students from the 9th grade (69%) answered that their speaking ability was good, three students (23%) described it as okay, and one student (7%) answered that it was not good. Four tenth-graders (17%) answered that they spoke English very well, nine students (40%) answered that their spoken English was good, and ten (43%) said it was okay. Of the eleventh graders, twelve (50%) said that they spoke English very well and twelve (50%) considered it good. On the average, eighty-three percent of the students rated themselves as very good or good speakers of English.

Students also rated their reading in English favorably when asked, “How well do you read English?” In response, one ninth grade student (7%) rated being able to read in English very well; ten (78%) answered that their reading was good, two students (15%), said it was not good. Four tenth graders (17%) answered that they read in English very well, twelve (53%) considered their reading in English good, while seven (30%) said it was okay. Of the eleventh graders, four students (17%) described their reading as very well, nineteen (80%) said it was good, and only one student (3%) said it was okay. Overall, eighty-four percent of the students of this study reported reading very well or good, and only sixteen percent rated their reading as okay, indicating low language anxiety when displaying the complex skill of reading.

According to Krashen and Terrell (1983) and Krashen (1985), the comprehensible input hypothesis states that the lack of comprehension of the target language is a reason for language learners to suffer anxiety and learn less. Students who encounter incomprehensible input in the target language will more likely have high affective filters, which will in turn block output and language learning. However, this was not the case of most students in this study considering that they rated their comprehension of English favorably when asked, “How well do you understand other people speaking to you in English?” In response, one ninth grade student (7%) answered very well, ten (78%) said their understanding was good, and two (15%) students described it was okay. Ten tenth-graders (43%) said they understood English very well, eleven (48%) said that their understanding was good, and only two (9%) described it as okay. Of the eleventh grade students, ten (42%) said they understood English very well, thirteen (54%) described their understanding as good, and only one (4%) said it was okay. As a result, eighty-nine percent of the participants responded that their understanding of other people’s English directed to them was either very well or good, and eleven percent described it as okay.

Implications for Teacher Training

If language teachers, especially those who are bilingual or are language minorities, model a great sense of accomplishment because they reached the goal of mastering a second language, they can help attenuate the anxiety of their ELLs. By exhibiting a sense of accomplishment and self-control in the language classrooms for having mastered a second language, teachers can influence students’ motivation and language anxiety. If language teachers prove themselves as life-long learners and show their interest and enthusiasm in their language classrooms, they automatically become role models of the appropriate disposition toward language learning and literacy. According to Pressley &
McCormick (1995), role modeling the appropriate disposition for learning is a desirable characteristic of good teaching. That is, the language teachers who respond favorably toward language when teaching language are practicing good teaching. Additionally, these affective states of teachers can have the supplementary effect of predisposing them to think and act favorably toward their students; they can redefine them as potential learners, as opposed to viewing the numerous second language learners as lacking.

Ideally, teacher training programs should attempt to address these types of affective states in teachers for the reasons just mentioned (Galluzo, 1995). It seems reasonable to conclude that teacher training programs, perhaps including in-services, should find ways to help future teachers use their personal experiences with language learning to the advantage of their English language learners. Also, teacher education programs would benefit future educators by teaching them to recognize the importance of the role of affection in language learning and how to work minimize its negative effect on the learning process. Consequently, future inquiry related to the role of affect and teacher training programs can consist of how language teachers should be trained to intelligently incorporate their affective states to advance language learning of students from different linguistic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. For this, teachers also need to know how culture shapes the affective states of individuals and how male and female language learners from different cultures and linguistic backgrounds differ in their feelings and perceptions of and language learning.

Future Research

The statistical analysis of survey items revealed language anxiety for females and males, data that are consistent with previous work. The survey also yields information about home based language use and previous language training, and length of stay in the country. However, these results reflect a methodological limitation of the study because the ELAS does not survey two detected factors that can confound the results and student performance. First, one factor refers to the length of time students interacted in English with relatives in their native countries. Although students reported using English back home, what remains unknown is how frequently the students used English, and the purposes they had for using it. Was it common for students to speak in English with relatives? If so, how common was it for them to speak in English? For what purposes did students use English? Second, although the survey explores that students spoke English back home, the survey fails to explore the quality of the English language use and its teaching back home. Was it for basic, social communication or was it more specialized and similar to the English encountered in school? Consequently, further probing into these areas is needed to better understand how they can impact language anxiety and learning. It seems possible that by exploring these factors through interviews, researchers may learn about the time devoted to learning English and about the nature of the interactions the participants had prior to arriving to the U.S. In theory, the length of time using English combined with the type of English they used may have facilitated the minimization of language anxiety.
References


