



The Level of Anxiety in Learning English as a Second Language among Students of the *Mengubah Destini Anak Bangsa* (MDAB) Programme in Universiti Teknologi MARA

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ABSTRACT

Anxiety is considered as one of the affective factors in second language learning. Empirical research has shown that anxiety can play both facilitative and debilitating roles in language learning. This paper reports a pilot study that examines the level of anxiety among the students of the Mengubah Destini Anak Bangsa (MDAB) programme in Universiti Teknologi MARA, the majority of whom came in only with a D score in English in the SPM examination. Such low score has created anxiety in classroom learning as they have to cope with the English language learning environment in the university. Using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) as a framework, the study examined the students' anxiety under four categories: 1) fear of negative evaluation, 2) communication apprehension, 3) test anxiety, and 4) anxiety of English Class. The results indicate that the students' anxiety level is rather significant with fear of negative evaluation being the highest. The findings can provide understanding on the learners' anxiety that can militate against their learning success. Informed classroom instructors will be able to help students reduce their anxiety by offering some coping strategies and providing more supportive classroom environment for them.

Keywords: *learning anxiety, Mengubah Destini Anak Bangsa (MDAB) Programme, apprehension, facilitative anxiety, debilitating anxiety*

Introduction

Language anxiety is the apprehensive feelings that an individual experiences in a situation that requires the use of a second language with which he or she is not fully proficient (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Although the feeling is subjective, it has been regarded as one of the affective factors that can influence second language acquisition. Even though anxiety has both facilitative and debilitating effects on learning (Alpert and Haber, 1960), most studies on language learning anxiety have shown a negative relationship between anxiety and language achievement. It seems that there have been consistent results that show anxiety and language achievement are negatively correlated (Casado and Dereshiwsky, 2001; Worde, 2003; Hauck and Hurd, 2005).

This paper specifically focuses on the English language learning anxiety among '*Mengubah Destini Anak Bangsa*' (MDAB) group of students in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). The MDAB students are those who do not meet the standard requirement in terms of academic achievement in their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) results, thus, unable to get a place in any public higher learning institutions in the country. However, UiTM believes that all students have the potentials but other factors like poor family background might have deterred them from exerting their potentials. Thus, with an aim of improving the socio-economic situation of the Bumiputra in Malaysia, these students are offered places to study in UiTM, giving them a chance to change their future. It is hoped, by enrolling them in the university, these students will be able to escape from the poverty cycle.

Nonetheless, language proficiency-wise, these students have very low level of proficiency in English as most of them only obtained a grade D in English in the SPM examination. Experience in the classroom has shown that the use of English as a medium of instruction in the classroom has created a very high level of communication apprehension in the language, hence, interferes with their ability to communicate normally. Such apprehension and oral defectiveness has led to high anxiety in their English language performance, which in turn, may also affect their academic performance as a whole.

This paper reports a pilot study that examines the level of language learning anxiety among the students of the *Mengubah Destini Anak Bangsa* (MDAB) programme in Universiti Teknologi MARA and the contributing factors. By understanding the nature of the anxiety, classroom instructors can help students reduce their anxiety by offering some coping strategies and providing more supportive classroom environment for them. The far-reaching goal of the study would be for the benefits of the students themselves. They can realise the level of root and extent of their own anxiety. They, themselves, may discover the strategies in coping with their own anxiety after having known the origin of their anxiety.

Language Learning Anxiety

Anxiety is generally defined as 'a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry' (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986 as cited in Brown, Robson and Rosenkjar, 2008, p. 364). Anxiety related to language learning is 'the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning' (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994, p. 284). Both MacIntyre and Gardner (1991, as cited in Brown et al., 2008, p.364) categorised language learning anxiety as 'situational anxiety' as it occurs at specific time and situation – in this case, the when and where second language learning takes place. MacIntyre and Gardner also proposed that 'language learning can be more anxiety provoking than learning in other subjects' (cited in Brown et al. 2008, p. 364).

Studies on language learning anxiety have been replete. These studies have examined language anxiety from a number of perspectives, namely, causes of anxiety (Baily, 1983; Young, 1991), the level of learners' anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986), the role of anxiety in learning (Alpert and Haber, 1960) and the correlation between anxiety and learning outcomes (Casado and Dereshiwsky, 2001; Worde, 2003; Hauck and Hurd, 2005).

The development of FLCAS by Horwitz et al (1986), has led to many extensive researches on a specific-situation anxiety, particularly of foreign language learning anxiety (Liu and Huang, 2010). Among the recent studies are researches involving the EFL non-English majors of three universities in China (Liu and Huang, 2010), distance learners of EFL in China (Hurd and Xiao, 2010), the Japanese EFL learners (Andrade and Williams, 2009), the ESL learners in Malaysian universities (Khairil Izwan and Nurul Lina, 2010; Zuhana and Shameem, 2008; Kamisah, Sheema Liza and Zuriani, 2008; Noran Fauziah, Rahil and Habibah, 2005), Indonesian EFL learners (Ardi, 2007), the international postgraduate students in South England (Brown, 2008), the Dutch, French, Chinese, Tunisian Arabic and Thai speaking learners of EFL in Belgium (Dewaele, 2002), the Hungarian EFL learners (Tóth, 2008), and many others. Despite the large number of studies conducted on the topic, these studies have shown inconclusive findings and warrant further investigation in different settings.

For example, Kamisah, Sheema Liza and Zuriani (2008) explores Malay students' anxiety in learning English in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), a public university which stresses the importance of English and decrees that it is the language of instruction in classroom. The study indicates that most respondents had high anxiety in English Language learning. It was also found that anxiety is negatively correlated with English-learning achievement among the respondents which suggests that anxiety plays a debilitating role in their language learning. Along the same line, Brown (2008) in her study on English language learning anxiety among her graduate students from South-East Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East shows that it is a common feeling shared by the respondents. Brown reported that 'the level of anxiety surrounding language ability was intense in the first few months of the semester ... in which almost all the students were worried and highly stressful ... over their ability to cope with assignments and lectures (p. 82). The anxiety faced by these students has led to many other uncomfortable feelings, among others, 'fear of making mistakes in spoken English and of irritating people, frustration, a sense of helplessness and ineptitude, a feeling of shame and inadequacy' (Brown, 2008, p. 82).

On the other hand, Liu and Huang (2010), in examining the foreign language anxiety and English learning motivation of the 980 undergraduate students from three universities in China found that the participants generally 'did not feel anxious in English class, fearful of being negatively evaluated, or apprehensive about both speaking and tests' (p. 4). The researchers claimed that this might be caused by the fact that the students have been exposed to English for a number of years. In the same vein, Khairil Izwan and Nurul Lina's (2010) study on the anxiety level of 60 Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) ESL learners found that the majority of the respondents had a moderate level of Communication Apprehension. The researchers felt that this might be due to the fact that the students were able to speak comfortably with their friends in English as that have more or less similar level of proficiency.

Despite a pool of studies done on English language learning anxiety, the writers strongly feel that the present study poses a great significance to the research on this area. While the empirical studies have looked into the anxiety among qualified students for university entrance, this study intends to investigate language anxiety that prevails among students the MDAB students, who, as mentioned earlier do not possess standard requirement for university entrance, but are required to study in an environment where English is the medium of instruction in the classroom. The anxiety that exists among these students warrants investigation so that this affective factor which may have consequences on their academic performance can be understood.

The Study

The main purpose of this study is to understand the MDAB students' anxiety in learning English as a second language. Specifically, it intends to examine the level of anxiety and identify the factors affecting the anxiety. This can be expressed



in the following research questions:

1. What is the level of anxiety in learning English among the students?
2. What are the underlying factors contributing to the anxiety?

Methodology

This study investigates the level of language learning anxiety in English as a second language among the students based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). The scale is designed based on the three major causes of language anxiety, namely, communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. In this study, the students' anxiety was examined under 4 categories:

1. Anxiety of English Classes
2. Communication Apprehension
3. Fear of Negative Evaluation
4. Test Anxiety

In this study, the FLCAS questionnaire was used as an instrument for data collection. The Bahasa Malaysia (BM) version of the statements in the questionnaire was given below the English ones to enable the respondents to complete it without any language difficulty. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part looked at the demographic background of the learners such as age, gender, and grade obtained for the English subject in their SPM examination. For this part, the questionnaire adopted both open-ended and close-ended questions. The second part consisted of thirty-two statements which were later categorised under communication anxiety (items no. 1, 9, 14, 18, 23, 28 and 31), fear of negative evaluation (items no. 3, 7, 13, 15, 20, 22, 24, 30 and 32), test anxiety (items no. 2, 8, 10, and 19) and anxiety of English classes (items no. 4, 5, 6, 11, 12, 16, 17, 21, 25, 26, 27 and 29). The learners were asked to rate each statement on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.

Data Collection

The actual study intends to collect data from the whole population of MDAB programme students in UiTM Pahang. However, the present paper only reports data from a sampling size of 30 of the population as the writers are still in the process of examining the relevancy of the statements in the questionnaires to the environment and culture of the target population.

The questionnaires were distributed to a group of MDAB programme students and administered by the writers during their English class. The items in the questionnaire were explained to the students but cautions were taken as not to lead them to a particular response.

Data Analysis

The data were treated quantitatively involving simple frequency counts of the items in Part II of the questionnaires. The responses from each item were tabulated according to the respective columns of the scale.

Results and Discussion

Although the study is still at its infant stage, the data have revealed important insights to anxiety in learning English among the MDAB programme students. The findings of the data are reported quantitatively and discussed under the four categories mentioned earlier (communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety and anxiety of English classes).

Demographic Profile

Out of the 30 respondents, 11 were male and 19 were female. The majority of these students, i.e 21, scored a grade D in the English subjects in their SPM examinations. The rest of the respondents scored grade E (4), grade C (4) and B (1). All but one respondent admitted that they chose to answer the BM version of the questionnaires.

All the respondents reported that BM is the main language used for communication at home. This is not surprising since all of them are Malays, thus, BM is their mother tongue. In addition to this language, 4 of the respondents claimed that they also use English at home, and 2 respondents use Javanese. In communicating with friends, all but one respondent claimed that they use BM as the main language. 11 of them use English and 2 respondents use Javanese. However, the extent to which these languages are used in their communication, i.e whether they are used at a full range or otherwise, is not known as it is not the objective of the study.

General Situation of Learners' Language Learning Anxiety

On the whole, the results reveal that all the respondents do have anxiety in learning the English Language in the university although the level of anxiety differs from one respondent to another. This is not surprising since 83% (25) of them failed their English subject in their SPM examination. Thus, having to learn everything in English might add up to the anxiety of learning the language.

The data also indicate that among the four categories examined, fear of negative evaluation is ranked as the highest anxiety level faced by the respondents. The following section discusses the findings in detail.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Table 1 shows that the fear of negative evaluation received quite a high percentage in average. It is very interesting to note that the results are slightly different from an earlier study by Kamisah, Sheema Liza and Zuraini (2008) on English Language learning anxiety among students in UiTM in general. They found that communication apprehension topped the anxiety among the students.

Table 1: Fear of Negative Evaluation

No	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3.	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in the EL class.	3	13	10	4
7.	I keep thinking that the other students are better than I am.	5	22	3	0
13.	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my EL class.	2	12	13	3
15.	I get upset when I don't understand what the lecturer is correcting.	3	17	10	0
20.	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in the EL class.	5	17	7	1
22.	I always feel that the other students speak the EL better than I do.	6	19	5	0
24.	EL class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	3	19	8	0
30.	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the EL	7	13	8	2
32.	I get nervous when the EL lecturer asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	6	22	1	1

n=30

As can be seen from the table, all but 1 statement (no. 13) reveal that the respondents fear negative evaluation the most when learning English. The highest level of fear among them is being asked in class (statement no. 32), feeling that other students are better than they are (statement no. 7) and feeling that other students could speak the English Language better they could (statement no. 22). This is followed by fear of being called on in class (statements no. 20 and 3), not understanding their mistakes and corrections by the lecturer (statement no. 15), being left behind (statement no. 24) and being laughed at (statement no. 30).

The writers feel that the respondents' fear of negative evaluation has largely to do first, with culture and second, with their status as MDAB students. As mentioned by Kamisah, Sheema Liza and Zuraini (2008), Malays generally do not like to receive low evaluations or criticisms about themselves. Thus, they tend to pay more attention to others' strength and their own weaknesses (p. 910). Such feeling may cause anxiety among these students as they feel that other people are better than them. This can be shown in the overwhelming responses in statements no. 7 and 22).

In addition, being students in the MDAB programme, these respondents know that they are not at par with their counterparts in terms of university entrance qualification. Thus, the feeling of being left behind and being laughed at prevails among them. This is shown in their responses in statements no.15, 24 and 30.

Communication Apprehension

Communication apprehension also receives an overwhelming response from the respondents. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2: Communication Apprehension

No	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English Language (EL) class.	3	18	8	1
9.	I start to panic when I have to speak without having preparation in the EL class.	5	20	4	1
14.	I would not be nervous speaking in the EL with native speakers.	1	9	17	3
18.	I feel confident when I speak in the EL class.	1	13	14	2
23.	I feel very self-conscious about speaking the EL in front of other students.	6	19	5	0
28.	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my EL class.	4	19	6	1
31.	I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the EL.	0	4	19	7

n=30

As can be seen from the table, fear of communication is attributed to the feeling of unsure (statement no. 1), panic (statement no. 9), nervous and confuse (statement no. 28) and self-conscious (statement no. 23).

It is easy to infer that such communication apprehension is due to the respondents' low level of proficiency in the English Language. Nearly all of the respondents do not have adequate proficiency in the English Language to enable them to speak it confidently. However, it is interesting to note that these learners only feel such a way when using English in the classroom and in front of fellow students. They claimed that they would be comfortable communicating in English with native speakers. Unfortunately, at this point of study, the writers did not gauge further information regarding this.

Test Anxiety

The results show that the level of test anxiety in the English Language among the students is not as significant as fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension. The following table shows the detail.

Table 3: Test Anxiety

No	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2.	I don't worry about making mistakes in the EL class.	3	10	12	5
8.	I am usually at ease during tests in my EL class.	2	8	16	4
10.	I worry about the consequences of failing my EL course.	17	13	0	0
19.	I am afraid my EL lecturer is ready to correct every mistake I make.	0	1	15	14

n=30

As can be seen from the table, in general, the respondents are not afraid of making mistakes in their learning (statements no. 2 and 19). This shows that they are willing to learn from their mistakes in order to improve their English Language proficiency.

However, as Malaysia is rather an examination-oriented country, i.e good examination results become one of the major criteria to judge an individual's success in learning, it is to be expected that these respondents worry more about tests and the consequences of failing (statements no. 8 and 10). All the respondents claimed that they worry about the consequences of failing the English Language course. This is due to the fact that a compulsory pass in the course is required before they can be accepted into the diploma level of study in the university. In addition, the academic evaluations in terms of tests, assignments and final examinations in all mainstream courses are all carried out in English, thus, there is a strong need for them to perform well in the subject to ensure good performance in other courses (Kamisah, Sheema Liza & Zuraini, 2008).

Anxiety of English Classes

Anxiety of English classes is rated rather low compared to the other categories of anxiety discussed previously. On the whole, the respondents do not feel anxious about their English Language class. Table 4 shows the results.

Table 4: Anxiety of English Classes

No	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4.	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the EL.	5	16	8	1
5.	It wouldn't bother me at all having to take EL courses.	4	11	6	9
6.	During EL class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	2	2	15	13
11.	I don't understand why some people get so upset over EL class.	4	17	6	1



12.	In EL class, I can get so nervous when I forget things I know.	7	20	3	0
16.	Even if I am well prepared for the EL class, I feel anxious about it.	5	21	4	0
17.	I often feel like not going to my EL class.	0	0	7	23
21.	I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.	2	17	9	2
25.	I feel more tense and nervous in my EL class than in other class.	2	14	11	3
27.	When I'm on my way to EL class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	1	15	13	1
29	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak the EL.	0	12	14	1

n=30

As can be seen from the table, the English Language class does not contribute significantly to the respondents' level of anxiety. It can be inferred that their anxiety of the English class is attributed more to their own level of proficiency in English (statements no. 4, 12 and 16).

It can be inferred from other statements that the respondents might not have enthusiastic feelings toward their English Language class (statements no. 5 and 11). This is probably the reason why they do not pay full attention in class (statement no. 6).

Conclusion

The results of this pilot study have informed the level and cause of anxiety in learning English among the MDAB programme students in UiTM. As instructors, we should be sensitive towards this affective factor and take it into account in our teaching. Students' fear of negative evaluation, feeling of panic and nervous in class and fear of tests, for example, have a serious pedagogical implication. Their anxiety in learning requires serious attention in evaluating our teaching approach and strategies in class, as well as providing more supportive classroom environment. It calls for our support in providing our learners with strategies in coping with and reducing their anxiety. If we are able to introduce them to effective ways of dealing with their anxiety, they may be able to debilitate it. As put forward by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991, p. 297),

Anxious individuals think about their own reaction to a task in addition to the demands of the task itself. The content of their thoughts is negative and centered on self-degradation.... If anxious students could focus on positive experiences in the second language, rather than on negative ones, the debilitating effects of language anxiety could be reduced.

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