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Language and Gender: Fear of Evaluation in Second Language Learning

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Abstract

In Malaysian classroom context, language learning is usually perceived as ordinary and less troublesome when it comes to first language (Bahasa Malaysia). Nevertheless, one has to agree that complaints are frequently voiced regarding second language learning (English). The most prominent detectable problem is viewed during evaluation in class where students are struggling to perform due to fear. Banks (2008) has portrayed that fear-if left unattended- will eventually hamper the learning process. Apart from that, it has been proven that female and male perceive fear differently (Wicks-Nelson & Israel, 2006). Hence, it is necessary to further investigate the severity of the problem. This study is conducted to identify students' perceptions of Fear of Evaluation as well as to determine the level of fear (also known as anxiety) for different gender. The instrument used is a set of questionnaire adapted from the measurement scale called FLCAS (Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale) which was introduced by Horwitz (1983). A total number of 56 university students are involved in this study.

Keywords: Evaluation, Fear, Language Learning, Gender, Students

Introduction

Enormous magnitude of effort has been contributed by educators and practitioners over the decades in the process of finding the best and applicable method to teach English as second language. In Malaysian education context, English is considered as the official second language where students are required to learn it since primary up to tertiary level. Though years have passed since the implementation of English language in school, problems still emerged throughout the process itself. The major issue of language difficulties –which is regularly suppressed - is quite parallel with anxiety or fear in class. One of the factors of the emergence of anxiety is fear of evaluation.

The issue of anxiety in language learning has been widely recognized for its significant impacts on language learners. Among all the learning disabilities, anxiety and fear have become the major factors in determining the successful of second language learning (Zheng, 2008). With the fact that anxiety too affects the level of comprehensible input received in class (Krashen, 1982), it is indisputable for educators and practitioners to prolong or procrastinate actions in finding solution to promote conducive environment for the process of acquisition and learning to happen. As put forward by Horwitz (1983), fear in class does contribute to inability to learn and react accordingly to the class surrounding including to lecturers and peers. The fear of evaluation factor indicates that the students in language class are afraid to receive negative feedbacks not only from other classmates but also from the lecturers or instructors (Watson & Friends, 1969). This leads to the feelings of afraid in making mistakes as well as trying to maintain their faces in front of their classmates and instructors. Price (1991) too, mentions that evaluation from others in class especially peers is the reason of why language learners feel uncomfortable to the surrounding. The feeling of being watched by others initiates insecurity and apprehension in class.

As fear or anxiety unfailingly continues to be a part of learning disability that constitutes detrimental feeling, the question about whether gender actually became a factor that promotes it is also rising. Researchers especially psychologist do agree that male and female view problems differently from one another. Wick-Nelson & Israel (2006) believe that male and female process situation or event differently especially concerning their self-identity. With that, it can be concluded that, male and female might have different experience on how they view or digest evaluation in class. For the issue to be properly addressed, educators must first know the level of fear of evaluation experienced by the learners. Therefore, the current study sought to investigate the level of the learners' fear of evaluation among students in one of the public universities in Malaysia.

Literature Review

The sources of fear in language learning

There are several important sources of fear or anxiety in language learning. According to Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986), the sources of language fear are the basis of formulating the three major factors that contribute to the feeling of anxiety in language learning. The three major factors are 1) Communication Apprehension, 2) Fear of Negative Evaluation, 3) Test Anxiety/ General Feeling of Anxiety. According to Young (1991), anxiety in language learning revolves around three main aspects which are the learners, teachers/instructors and the instructional practice. From these aspects, Young has identified six potential sources of language anxiety which are 1) Personal and interpersonal anxiety, 2) Learner beliefs about language teaching, 3) Instructor beliefs about language teaching, 4) Instructor-Learner actions, 5) Classroom procedure and lastly 6) Language testing. Ohata (2005) later concludes them as three prominent issues which include 1) Socio-psychological issue of language anxiety, 2) Learner/Instructor beliefs on language learning and teaching and 3) Instructor-Learner interactions/classroom procedures

Fear of Evaluation

Watson & Friend (1969) define fear of negative evaluation as 'apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively' (as cited in Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1991:31). As evaluation on each other is very common in second language classes, the students feel frequently uncomfortable when they think that they are being watched by both lecturer and peers (Na, 2007) which later triggers the feeling of apprehension in language classroom since it is referred as a type of anxiety experienced in interpersonal communicative settings. The emotional outburst happens when students have little control over the situation regardless whether they are in small group or large crowd. Another aspect in fear of negative evaluation is the error correction. According to Von Worde (2003) and Ohata (2005), frustration and anger exist when the lecturer corrects the error before they have time to completely formulate a response. This interruption would regularly cause students to lose focus while formulating answers since they become very sensitive when it comes to error correction in front of their friends (McIntyre & Gardner, 1991). The feeling of constantly being tested evokes condition whereby every correction perceived as a sign of failure. This, indubitably raises concerned about 'making errors especially in pronunciation' (Price, 1991:105).

Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1991) reported that students become self-conscious when they are required to engage in classroom activities especially speaking. These kinds of activities expose their inadequacies and this often lead to fear or even panic. In a second language class, speaking activity is very essential to ensure that the students really learn the language (Zheng, 2008). However, most of the speaking activities in second language classroom unconsciously promote the environment of evaluating others' proficiencies that incurs competition. Since second language learning is different from the first language (Lightbown and Spada, 1999), students tend to be very careful and become highly sensitive to the mistakes they might do. This is associated to role of speaker's beliefs where feeling intimidated when others speak better manifests fear while getting evaluation from others. Price's study suggests that this belief actually became the potential sources of anxiety when some students believe that their language skills are weaker than the others.

Language and Gender

With significant findings, studies conducted all around the world have indicated that, there is a correlation between language fear and gender. As mentioned by McLean & Anderson (2009), female have greater fear and have high possibility to develop anxiety as compared to men. This is supported by Wicks-Nelson & Israel (2006) who also claim anxiety is more noticeable in female as compared to male. Among the factors that cause this are self-confidence, proficiency (Bruce *et. al*, 2005), security, and superiority. Under certain circumstances, female tend to feel easily vulnerable while male on the other hand do obtain more self-control and ability to detach themselves from unpleasant feelings. Machida (2001), in her study of FL Japanese language class anxiety based on gender differences found that female learners are more anxious than the male counterparts. On the contrary, Kitano (2001), in his research in the context of English as a foreign language found that in comparison to female students, male students tend to be more anxious while learning a second language. The data shows that male students are found to be more apprehensive in speaking as they perceive their speech to be less competent than females.

However, findings on the relationship between learners difference in gender with their performance, anxiety level and understandings in learning second language remain inconclusive and debatable (Matsuda &Gobel, 2004). According to Rosenfeld &Berko (1990:125), different gender does not affect the communication apprehension as they claim that 'gender is not significant in communication anxiety'. Although males tend to be shy while female tend to have more public speaking anxiety, there seem to be a few consistent differences between the genders. Additionally, a study conducted by Mejias *et al.* (1991) on the oral communication apprehension among Mexican American students in Texas found that Mexican American females in their study consistently produced higher communication score than the Mexican American males. This is also supported by Chang (1997) who reports similar result.

Methodology

Respondents

The respondents of this study were 56 students from public university who enrolled in English language classes. The respondents were taken from the first level of English classes which was semester 1. The students were required to sit for final examination at the end of the semester along with five types of tests throughout the semester which are speaking, listening, grammar, reading and writing. Apart from that, non-grading evaluations on their performance were also conducted throughout the semester in activities like presentation, class discussion, opinion-sharing session and many more. The respondents involved in this study were 34 female and 22 male students.

Instrument/Data Analysis

This study utilized the quantitative research methodology where the instrument used to collect the data was in a questionnaire form. The questionnaire was adapted from the measurement scale of foreign language anxiety called FLACS (Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale) introduced by Horwitz (1983). The FLACS was used to determine respondents' fear of evaluation level. Researchers all around the world have proven that FLACS is relevant to be used in order to determine the anxiety level for second language learning as well. This is due to the reliability of the questionnaires to be used in all language learning. This is supported by study conducted by Kondo and Yang (2004) who had used FLACS to determine the anxiety level in second language learning.

The questionnaire consists of two different sections which are; Section A for Personal details and Section B for fear of evaluation factors. The questionnaire was presented in two versions which were English and Bahasa Malaysia to assist respondents understanding of the items in the questionnaire. Respondents from this study were required to answer 11 items regarding their feelings of being evaluated by both peers and lecturer in class. The instrument consisted of the five Likert Scales from 'Strongly Agree' (5), 'Agree' (4), 'Undecided' (3), 'Disagree' (2) and lastly 'Strongly Disagree' (1). The levels of anxiety for fear of evaluation were divided into two levels which were high and low. The low level of anxiety was determined from the mean value between 1.00 to 3.00 while the high level was taken from the range of 3.01 to 5.00. The data in this study were analyzed using Statistical package For Social Science (SPSS) software version 20.0 for frequency, percentage, and mean value.

Findings and Discussion

Gender	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Male	22	39.29
Female	34	60.71
Total	56	100

Table 1: Frequency and percentage According to Gender

No	Item	Male			Female		
		Mean	Level	Std. D	Mean	Level	Std. D
1	I am worried about making mistakes in my English class.	3.45	High	0.963	3.82	High	1.14
2	I get upset when I do not understand what the lecturer is correcting.	3.18	High	1.05	3.85	High	1.04
3	I am usually not at ease during tests in my English class.	2.95	Low	0.99	3.06	High	1.01
4	I am afraid that my lecturer is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.41	Low	1.22	3.00	Low	1.27
5	I am afraid to make grammar mistakes when I am speaking.	3.14	High	1.08	3.94	High	0.98
6	I am afraid when my lecturer calls me up to answer question in class	2.68	Low	1.12	3.00	Low	1.34
7	The more I practice in my English, the more confused I get.	2.36	Low	1.09	1.94	Low	0.98
8	I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	3.27	High	0.88	3.97	High	0.71
9	I am afraid that the students will laugh at me when I speak using English language.	2.91	Low	1.23	3.29	High	1.16
10	I am afraid that they will think that I am stupid	3.14	High	1.08	2.79	Low	1.22
11	I keep thinking that other students are better in English language than I am.	3.36	High	1.21	3.76	High	1.01

Table 2: Mean value for male and female

It has been acknowledged by most educational practitioners from all around the world about the gender difference that affects perceptions on evaluation in class. Referring to the result, it indicates that male students normally react negatively during evaluation. This might be due to the fact that male usually have to 'maintain face' as compared to female students. From the beginning, it should be noted that male students have the tendency to try looking more

masculine that constitutes the urges to be better than female in every aspect. Even if they pretend to look more lay-back and might have the tendency to make jokes during discussion in class, they still try - as much as possible - to not look 'stupid' especially in front of the opposite gender. Coates (2004) too in her study mentions that male needs to maintain the 'air' of masculinity around them. Being regarded as 'stupid' or less intelligent somehow challenges their masculinity image particularly when it is done in front of female students.

The results also indicate low level of fear for the statement of being laugh in front of others. To be laugh at is a common act for male as it is included in their group interaction with the same gender (Heering, 2014). Some male in fact, have more self-control and have the ability to detach themselves from unpleasant feeling. In short, some of them might adopt the 'shutting down' technique where they appear to be more lay back and careless exteriorly. It is-as the matter of fact- a pleasant coping mechanism. Female students on the other hand perceive being laughed at as a sign of humiliation thus unacceptable. In Malaysian context, such act is considered as Face –Threatening Act (FTA). This is somehow related to the degree of acceptance among the females. As for the male students, they are more blunt and upfront when it comes to joking about others' weaknesses. The stronger the group solidarity is, the better access one will get in crossing others' personal barriers thus permitting more sarcasm and jokes. Female students however are normally encompassed by defensiveness to be laughed at especially where maintaining femininity is concerned. This somehow is portrayed as a demonstration of weaknesses in front of others especially while presenting in front of the opposite gender (Tom *et. al*, 2013).

Additionally, there is a connection between fear of evaluation and communication apprehension in language learning. In this study, it is found that female have high level of fear when it comes to speaking or communicating in class. Female students naturally do not like to be perceived as less proficient and less confident (Bruce *et al*, 2005), therefore escalating their anxiety whenever they are asked to involve themselves in activities like speaking and listening. Worrying to make grammar mistakes while speaking is a proof that female students are more prone to communication anxiety as compared to male. Since communication is considered as an invisible platform of evaluating one's performance, it is a medium and a mirror to one's achievement.

Studies have suggested that fear of evaluation comes particularly from the language instructor/lecturer in class. Young (1991) has also mentioned that one of the main sources of fear or anxiety in language learning comes from lecturer. From the results however, it was found that the students-both male and female- have neither worries nor fear on the evaluation from lecturer. This somehow indicates that lecturer might not be the main target to be blamed in language class anymore. The students are reported to fear peers evaluation more as compared to the lecturer. It signifies that correcting mistakes from lecturer does not pose any threat for them. As lecturer is viewed as the main authoritative figure in class, students – both male and female - indirectly accept that any correction is a natural gesture and submit to be getting evaluation from superior figure. Having mentally prepared with such connotation, it might be the key for having less fear in second language class.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Realization on the significance to produce more proficient students in English language is not an alien issue anymore. Educators, theorist and practitioners –not to forget- politicians are in this together. It is very apparent that over the years, the requirement to achieve it is indirectly putting pressure to teachers and lecturers in both secondary and tertiary level. Many have also tried to come out with the best teaching techniques or methods that are believed to help in increasing the proficiency of the students. However the fact that so many rapid and abrupt changes adopted in school and university are causing students to be more and more clueless thus confused.

The system has been trying so hard to try to make a different with the existing and future existing products and syllabus. However, the core of this problem is to actually cater it from the very basic of the learning itself. When language learning involved evaluation, it will definitely somehow evoke fear and anxiety. There is no doubt that evaluations are needed in language classes in order to measure achievement. Thus, creating and promoting conducive and comfortable learning environment are highly essential. This consists of free-negative evaluation in class. One needs to take into account of the gender differences as well as their perceptions towards evaluation itself. They need to be made understood on the impact of evaluating others in class. As far the culture is concerned, being polite and understanding is thinning in the society. There is too much gap of attitudes in students where the silent keep on being the silent and the outspoken conquer the class. It is probably more practical to now concede that the days of being afraid of lecturer have long gone.

Long have the responsibility being parked at the inability of educators to be the only just responsible party to reduce anxiety and fear in language teaching. Nevertheless, the true reason is always neglected where the problem sometimes does not arise due to the authoritative figure but the surrounding involving the students themselves. The consequences of evaluation from peers are more alarming thus should be made as priority in the list of challenges and problems in language learning. Lecturers too undoubtedly have to play role in managing and controlling the class to avoid such tarnishing confidence act to happen.

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