

The Study of Factors Affecting English Language Learning Anxiety: A Case Study of Master's Degree Program Students in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the extent of foreign language learning anxiety experienced by the first and second-year graduate students majoring in English Language Teaching at Ramkhamhaeng University, and the factors affecting their English language learning. The respondents were 39 students enrolled in the academic years 2021 and 2022. The research instrument was a questionnaire with open-ended questions. The results revealed that the respondents had high anxiety when they learned the English language with the mean scores of 3.55 out of 5.0. Communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation were two dimensions reported to have high levels of anxiety with the mean scores of 4.25 and 4.11 respectively. Lastly, test anxiety was at a moderate level with the mean score of 2.78. The respondents were most panicked when they were asked to speak without preparation in a language class with a mean of 4.35. Followed by anxiety related to being corrected by the teacher with the mean scores of 4.20. Moreover, the respondents were worried about the consequences of failing foreign language classes with the mean scores of 4.15.

Keywords :Foreign Language Learning, Anxiety, Communication Apprehension, Fear of Negative Evaluation, Test anxiety

Introduction

In this globalization era, English undoubtedly becomes an important tool for studying and working. Moreover, English plays a vital role in becoming internationally competitive and being a global citizen (Al-Saggaf, Mohammad & Binti Rusli, Zur Ain., 2021). The Thailand Ministry of Education also introduced the National Education Act (NEA) in 1999. One of the main goals of NEA is to focus on improving Thai students across educational level so that they can compete at an international level and become effective global citizens (Kulwattanapaisarn, Yiamsawat, Siripittrakul, and Soe, 2022). Although the Ministry of Education has established such educational goals for Thai students, the average proficiency level of Thai university students is still low though

English language has been taught in school since the primary school level (Kulwattanapaisarn et al, 2022).

Since 2010, a number of universities in Thailand have been using English as a medium of instruction for English courses such as English, English for Business, English for Careers, English for Tourism, and English Language Teaching in order to increase students' exposure to English language in classrooms (Hengsadeeikul et al., 2010). Nonetheless, with Thai students' lower English language proficiency, Kulwattanapaisarn et al (2022) reported that English-medium instruction was very difficult for students to understand the class contents as such instruction required the students to use all four English language skills extensively, resulting in high levels of anxiety when they use English in class.

Success in second language learning relies on many factors including the levels of students' motivation, their confidence, as well as the levels of their anxiety (Krashen, 1982). According to Krashen's second-language learning's theory (1982), adults develop English competence through language learning and language acquisition. To acquire language successfully, the difficulty levels of "comprehensible input" or information that can be understood must be one step higher than where the current level is. Therefore, teachers should provide understandable communication to students, allow them to have a silent period, and create a relaxed atmosphere in class. Krashen (1982) also stated that learning anxiety greatly hinders students in achieving a higher level of proficiency as well as directly related to the success of second-language learning. Similarly, Erdina et al. (2020) conducted a study with their students who studied English as their second language. The results showed that there was a negative correlation between anxiety and students' final grades.

There are several research related to language anxiety conducted to study the extent of anxiety and factors or sources contributing to language anxiety. For example, Paranuwat (2011) found that her participants had a moderate level of foreign language learning anxiety. Besides, the factors contributing to such anxiety include both internal and external factors like being worried about making English communication mistakes and feeling fear of looking less competent in class. In addition, the study from Kulwattanapaisarn et al. (2022) who conducted a study among Thai university students yielded the result indicating that most participants who were EFL students had anxiety when speaking English in class.

To provide additional findings in the same field, this independent study has been carried out. This study discusses and investigates the level of students' anxiety when learning English as well as factors affecting English language learning anxiety. The sample of this study included graduate students majoring in English Language Teaching at Ramkhamhaeng University. The findings may benefit students, teachers, and all educational institutes, especially at a tertiary level, by shedding light on language learning anxiety, factors affecting English language learning, and possible ways to prevent or deal with it.

Research Objectives

The main purposes of the present study were as follows:

1. To investigate the extent to which anxiety in foreign language learning affects the students' English language learning, and
2. To identify factors affecting the students in foreign language learning.

Research Questions

To provide additional findings in the same field, this independent study has been carried out. This study discusses and investigates the level of students' anxiety when learning English as well as factors affecting learning anxiety. This study was carried out to answer the following questions:

1. Do learners have anxiety when they learn the English language?
2. What are the major factors that affect the learners' English language learning?

Literature Review

The Definitions of Language Anxiety

Language anxiety is defined as "the individual's discomfort when using the second language" (Clément & Kruidenier, 1985, p. 36). Anxiety is a vital factor related to language learning success. Language anxiety "encompasses the feelings of worry and negative, fear-related emotions associated with learning or using a language that is not an individual's mother tongue" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Young (1992) explains anxiety in learning foreign languages as a complex process that is difficult to be measured, but unavoidable affects second language learning on many levels. Moreover, Oxford (1999) states that language anxiety is a form of fear associated with speaking, listening, and learning foreign languages. However, in some situations, anxiety acts as a useful human mechanism to be effective in managing and controlling stimuli in the surrounding environment (Calicchio, 2020, p.3). In addition, Horwitz et al. (1986) propose three sources of language anxiety: 1) "communication apprehension" or the fear of using foreign languages to communicate with people. 2) "fear of negative evaluation" or the fear of negative feedback and evaluation. 3) "test anxiety" or the anxiety derives from tests or academic evaluation.

Conceptual Framework of Language Anxiety

Horwitz et al. (1986) examined the theoretical ideas of language anxiety, and the conceptual framework was used as a foundation of subsequent research with a focus on speaking and listening skills (Aida, 1994). According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), language anxiety is the result of three main sources: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

Communication apprehension refers to reluctance to communicate with people using a foreign language, to speak in front of other people, or to listen to a spoken language because a person feels shy or afraid of making mistakes. McCroskey (1984) adds that learners who suffer from this type of learning anxiety have shared behavioral patterns which include avoidance behaviors and disengagement of communication.

Test anxiety is worry over academic assessment. It could be described as a negative experience that many students hold either consciously or unconsciously in numerous academic settings, along with a dread of failing exams. This kind of anxiety is based on a fear of academic assessment and a fear of failing (Horwitz and Young, 1991).

Fear of negative evaluation occurs when foreign language learners feel the lack of their language ability to impress others during social interactions and it is a direct apprehension towards negative evaluation or feedback from others (MacIntyre, 1999).

Ways to Reduce Language Anxiety

MacIntyre (1999) states that language teachers are the main factor that helps reduce students' language anxiety. To lower students' language anxiety, foreign language teachers should take all factors into consideration. These include understanding the nature of students' anxiety, creating a friendly and fun class atmosphere, choosing proper correcting techniques, having various ways to evaluate students, and providing students with cultural knowledge of the target language.

Language Anxiety Scales

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) propose that communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety are three main sources affecting language anxiety. To evaluate learners' anxiety based on such sources, Horwitz et al. (1986) also present the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, or FLCAS. The FLCAS is a self-report questionnaire which consists of 33 items. The Likert scale, which ranges from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree", is used for assessing respondents' reactions related to communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

Studies of Language Anxiety

Worde (2003 as cited in Parauwat, 2011) conducted qualitative research to identify possible factors contributing to students' anxiety in learning a second language. Interviews were conducted with students from a variety of language classrooms (French, German, and Spanish) using a series of 10 questions designed to elicit responses to the five research questions. The interview indicates that the interviewees view their language class very negatively. Several students who were asked to describe their emotions gave examples of how anxiousness can result in annoyance and even anger. In addition, several interviewees felt glad to discover that they were not the only ones who had anxiety.

Erdiana et al. (2020) report on speaking anxiety experienced by EFL students. This study yields the results that 38% of the students had moderate-level anxiety, 62% of the students had high-level anxiety. It can be concluded from the result that most students had a moderate level of speaking anxiety.

Al-Saggaf et al. (2021) conducted a study to investigate the level of language anxiety in the classroom among students in a higher education institute in Malaysia. The findings indicate that in the test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, students experienced a moderate level of language anxiety. Whereas in the communication apprehension, they experienced a high level of language anxiety.

Studies of Language Anxiety in the Thai Context

Sarawit (1996) investigated the relationship between language anxiety in his English class and the achievement in English of his first-year university students at Naresuan University. The findings show a negative correlation between anxiety levels and students' grades in an English foundation class regardless of students' majors.

According to Udomkit (2003), the lack of opportunities for students to participate in classroom communication, students' lack of confidence when speaking English in class, as well as affective factors like interpersonal skills, classroom activities, and low self-esteem are all contributing factors to the language anxiety of the Basic Signal Officers in the English classroom at the Signal School.

Language anxiety levels and other factors were also examined by Bunrueng (2008) in Loei Rajabhat University students attending the English for Communication course. The results focused on six areas: anxiety from speaking, anxiety from listening, anxiety from reading, anxiety from writing, anxiety from teaching-learning activity, and anxiety from teaching media and evaluation. The results revealed that speaking anxiety received a high rating, while the others received a medium rating. It was discovered that if students did not prepare, they were particularly anxious to speak English in an English class, that they lacked the courage to volunteer themselves to answer questions, that they felt uncomfortable when the teacher asked them, that they were concerned about the correctness of grammar used, that they felt lack confidence in speaking, and that they were intimidated when conversing in English with teachers and friends. The English majors and the Business English majors were found to have moderate levels of anxiety when the anxiety levels of the students were compared depending on their majors.

Lastly, Tananuraksakul (2011) assessed the degrees of confidence and the level of anxiety of 69 Thai undergraduate students. The findings revealed that the level of confidence and anxiety was at a moderate level as they were shy and felt unease when speaking English with both Thai classmates and foreign teachers. Moreover, students who were identified with a very low level of confidence admitted that "I don't think I can speak English". And students who were identified with a high level of confidence stated that "I feel worried about grammar when I have to speak English and when I have speaking tests." Evidently, the above studies demonstrated existing foreign language anxiety in the Thai classroom context.

Research Methodology

Research Tools

This study used a questionnaire for quantitative data collection. For the qualitative data, open-ended questions were also provided. The questionnaire used for this study consists of three sections:

Section one of the questionnaire captured the demographics of the respondents, i.e., gender, age, and occupation. Section two of the questionnaire was adopted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). FLCAS contains 33 items which use a 5-point Likert Scale to measure the extent of foreign language learning anxiety. The three dimensions include (1) communication apprehension, (2) fear of negative evaluation, and (3) test anxiety. Section three of the questionnaire was a set of ten open-ended questions adapted from interview questions originated from Yan and Horwitz (2008) and Price (1991) to further explore the potential causes of the students' foreign language learning anxiety. An evaluation for content validity of the ten open-ended questions was done by three experts who are in the field of teaching English as a foreign language. All ten questions were approved as they earned IOC scores between .67 and 1.00.

Participants and Setting

Using a convenience sampling method, the population of this study were 39 graduate students who are currently studying in the first and second year of the master's degree program majoring in English Language Teaching. They enrolled in the academic years of 2021 and 2022. The students participated in both weekday courses and weekend courses. The teaching and learning activities of the courses in this master's degree program consisted of lectures, discussions, group assignments, report writings, academic presentations, and self-study tasks. The program covered all skills for the English language learning including reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The lecturers in this course were speakers of Thai language and native English speakers.

Data Collection and Analysis

After the questionnaire and open-ended questions were reviewed by three experts, the researcher requested permission to administer the questionnaire from the head of the English Language Teaching department, Ramkhamhaeng University. Google form was used to collect the data as it was a more convenient platform to use with participants from different classes. The data collection process was started at the beginning of the academic year 2023.

The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was utilized to analyze quantitative data. To investigate the extent of foreign language learning anxiety, the five-score levels of Likert Scale was valued to the questionnaire. The extent of foreign language learning anxiety was determined by the mean score of each item in the questionnaire and

the overall items were also calculated. The results from calculation demonstrated the mean scores of each item as well as the overall items varying from 1.00 (No anxiety or strongly little anxiety) to 5.00 (Strongly high anxiety).

The factors contributing to foreign language learning anxiety were determined by the mean scores. The items in the questionnaire which were calculated with the mean scores above or equal to 3.50 were determined as a factor affecting foreign language learning anxiety.

To analyze the qualitative data received from the open-ended questions, the responses were categorized based on factors relevant to foreign language learning anxiety derived from the literatures review process. These factors include 1) factors related to the learners 2) factors related to the teachers 3) factors related to the class instructions and activities and 4) factors related to the assessment and test.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of Quantitative Data

RQ1. Do learners have anxiety when they learn the English language?

The extent of foreign language learning anxiety was determined by the mean score of each item in the questionnaire and the overall items were also calculated. The results from calculation demonstrated the mean scores of each item as well as the overall items varying from 1.00 (no or strongly little anxiety) to 5.00 (strongly high anxiety). The results show that the level of anxiety is at a high level with the mean score of 4.25 in the communication apprehension dimension. Next, the respondents reported a relatively high level of fear of negative evaluation with the mean scores of 4.11. While the respondents reported their test anxiety at a moderate level. Overall, the mean scores of the total items from the three dimensions indicate the extent of foreign language anxiety among the respondents were at a high level (see Table 1).

Table 1 Foreign language anxiety among graduate students

Dimension	Total number of items	Mean	Mean of dimension	Interpretation of the mean
Communication Apprehension	11	46.78	4.25	High anxiety
Fear of Negative Evaluation	7	28.80	4.11	High anxiety
Test Anxiety	15	41.62	2.78	Moderate anxiety
Total	33	117.23	3.55	High anxiety

RQ2. What are the major factors that affect the learners’ English language learning?

Section two of the questionnaire used in this study included 33 items indicating three dimensions affecting the foreign language learning of the graduate students majoring in English Language Teaching at Ramkhamhaeng University. To identify which items were the major factors affecting their English language learning anxiety the most, the mean scores of each item was identified. The items with the mean score less than or equal 3.50 were identified as a major factor. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Major factors of foreign language learning anxiety

Dimension	Items	Items with mean score ≥ 3.50	Justification to be a major factor
Communication Apprehension	1, 4, 5, 9, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 26, 28	1, 4, 18	Yes
Fear of Negative Evaluation	6, 7, 11, 15, 17, 24, 27	6, 15, 17, 27	Yes
Test Anxiety	2, 3, 8, 10, 13, 19, 22, 23, 21, 25, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33	8, 29	Yes

The results in Table 2 indicate items in each dimension which were identified as major factors affecting the respondents’ anxiety in English language learning. With the mean scores of 3.50 and above, there were 11 items that indicated major factors of foreign language learning anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation dimension yielded the greatest numbers of items (4 items), followed by 3 items in communication apprehension, and 2 items in test anxiety respectively. The mean scores of those items are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Mean scores of each item

Item	Major Factor	Mean
Communication Apprehension		
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.	3.54
4	It frightens me when I don’t understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language	3.59
18	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in a language class.	4.35

Fear of negative Evaluation		
6	I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.	3.72
15	I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	4.05
17	I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	4.20
27	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.	3.84
Test Anxiety		
8	I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.	4.15
29	I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	3.94

Table 3 shows the items the respondents were most anxious about. They reported about being panicked when they were asked to speak without preparation in a language class, which represented communication apprehension dimension with the mean scores of 4.35 out of 5.00. Besides, anxiety related to being corrected for language mistakes by the teacher indicated fear of negative evaluation yielding the mean scores of 4.20. Worrying about the consequences of failing foreign language classes indicated their test anxiety with the mean score of 4.15. The lowest mean scores of the overall factors were an unsure feeling when they had to speak an English language in class with the mean scores of 3.54 in the communication apprehension dimension.

Analysis of Qualitative Data: Open-ended questions

The responses were categorized based on factors relevant to foreign language learning anxiety suggested in chapter two including 1) factors related to the learners 2) factors related to the teachers 3) factors related to the class instructions and activities, and 4) factors related to the assessment and test. The respondents wrote their answers to the ten open-ended which were analyzed and reported as follows:

Factors Related to the Learners

The results show that having the right attitudes toward learning the English language could lessen learning anxiety. Moreover, if students always compare themselves with other classmates who speak better English, they will likely feel less motivated and more anxious when attending an English class. In addition, some participants suggested that preparing for an English class in advance would help them communicate with a native English teacher better and promote participation in class activities more actively. Some of

the recommendations included looking up the meanings of vocabulary, reading the textbook in advance, and self-studying on the topics in the chapters of the English textbook.

Factors Related to the Teachers

According to respondents, tones, gestures, and characteristics of the teachers were factors affecting students' anxiety. Participants felt more relaxed in class and had more motivation to learn when their teachers were funny, friendly, and polite. The teachers should also listen to students' feedback and adapt accordingly, especially issues related to learning. For example, the teacher could ask for feedback at the end of the class about the class activities, tests, schedule, and break time, then discuss possibilities to adapt to the feedback with students. Moreover, the teachers should avoid calling out students to answer questions or participate in class activities unless students volunteer to do them. Lastly, the pronouns being used to refer to students should be respectful, and the polite endings should also be used with students.

Factors Related to the Class Instructions and Activities

The participants stated that more interactive activities such as games, roleplays, debates, singing, acting out, and technologies could be incorporated into an English lesson to make class instructions more relaxed and less stressful. In addition, a variety of grouping techniques can be used in class. Working in a small group allowed learners to feel more secure in their learning and less intimidated in speaking English. Next, the class size also affected the learning atmosphere. Participants viewed that the small-size class (less than 20 students) helps students to feel less anxious. Also, the class time should also include breaks, especially after students were assigned difficult tasks to do. Lastly, one participant mentioned about taking students to learn English outside the classroom to make students feel more relaxed.

Factors Related to the Assessment and Test

Participants reported that speaking and grammar tests were the types of tests they felt stressed the most. To do quizzes throughout the course rather than one final test at the end of the course allowed them to feel less anxious about the scores and the grades. In addition, the content of the tests should be matched with what students learned and the levels of difficulty of the tests should be suitable for the student's proficiency. Lastly, students should be informed in advance about the tests so that ample preparation time could be useful for lesson reviews.. By asking students to do the quizzes or tests without advanced notice increased the student's anxiety levels.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrated that the participants had high levels of anxiety when they learned the English language with mean scores of 3.55 out of 5.00. In addition, the mean scores of the items in the questionnaire ranged from 2.45 to 4.35, representing low levels to high levels of anxiety. The results from this study are consistent with those of Al-Saggaf and Rusli's study (2021) reported that the students at a higher education institute in Malaysia also experienced a high level of anxiety, resulting from fear of negative evaluation. Whereas communication apprehension and test anxiety were reported to be at a moderate level. The results from this study are also congruent with Erdiana, Daude, Sari, and Dwitami's study (2020) which showed that EFL students also had speaking anxiety. The results determined that 38 percent of the students had moderate levels of anxiety and 62 percent of the students had high-level anxiety. Lastly, the results from this study are also consistent with the study carried out by Udomkit (2003) revealing that the students had a strong level of learning anxiety. In addition, the results from the study carried out by Ningsih et al (2020) indicated that the students felt most anxious when they had to speak English and felt less anxious when they had to read and write.

Regarding the factors affecting the students in foreign language learning anxiety, the results of the present study showed that the factors resulted from the three main dimensions: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety generated a varied extent of anxiety. According to the results of this study, communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation were the two dimensions reported to have a high level of anxiety with the mean scores of 4.25 and 4.11 respectively. Finally, anxiety related to the test evaluation was at a moderate level with the mean score of 2.78. The results from this study are also in line with the study of Parauwat (2011) and Erdiana et al (2020) who reported that their EFL university students had a high level of anxiety, resulting from communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation.

Furthermore, the results from this study indicated that the respondents were most anxious about being panicked when they were asked to speak without preparation in a language class, which represented communication apprehension dimension with a mean of 4.35. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), lack of preparation time before doing foreign language classroom tasks has a negative consequence on student's anxiety, especially students with lower language proficiency. The study from Ningsih et al (2020) also revealed that the students had a higher level of anxiety from speaking, and had a lower level anxiety from reading and writing.

It was also found that anxiety related to being corrected for language mistakes by the teacher also represented fear of negative evaluation, showing the second most mean score of 4.20. According to Young (1990), being corrected in front of other students in class affects the level of students' anxiety. Moreover, receiving negative feedback from a teacher causes students to have lower self-esteem. In addition, Young (1990) pointed out that error correction techniques used by a teacher can negatively stimulate learners' anxiety.

Test anxiety was found to be the third major factor of foreign language anxiety which was investigated in this study. The results indicated that respondents were worried

about the consequences of failing English language classes indicating test anxiety dimension with a mean score of 4.15. This result seems to be in line with Worde (2003) which claims that students' expectation to have good grades in foreign language classes can in turn be a factor affecting their anxiety when the outcome of the test is not what they expect. According to Young (1990), students associate failure of learning a foreign language class with other failures in life. If students were unsuccessful in learning a foreign language, they believed that it was unlikely to be successful in anything they do in the future.

Finally, the results from the ten open-ended questions suggested that factors related to the teachers, the learners, the class instructions and activities, and the assessment can also affect students in foreign language learning. The respondents reported their ideas to lessen their learning anxiety and to create a friendly atmosphere in English language classrooms. Firstly, the learners need to have the right attitudes toward learning English by focusing on their own progress and not comparing themselves with other students in the class. Self-studying before class will help students to participate more actively in all language activities and feel less anxious. Secondly, tones, gestures, and characteristics of the teachers could affect students' anxiety. Moreover, teachers should be attentive when receiving feedback from students, be mindful when picking particular students to answer questions, and be polite when addressing students could make a classroom less stressful. Thirdly, more interactive activities and grouping techniques can be incorporated into an English lesson to make class instructions more relaxed. Allowing students to have breaks can also lessen a level of students' anxiety. Lastly, participants suggested that instead of having one final test at the end, quizzes throughout the course should be done to make students feel less anxious. In addition, the content of the test and the taught contents should be matched. Students should also be informed in advance about the test. The results from the open-ended questions are consistent with the study of Bunrueng (2008) who showed that six areas of anxiety, namely, speaking, listening, reading, writing, teaching-learning activity, and teaching media and evaluation can result vastly in foreign language learning anxiety.

Limitations of the Study

Due to the limited number of populations of this study, it was challenging to encourage participants to complete the questionnaire. In addition, since the three sections of the questionnaire were in English, some participants reported the difficulties in understanding the questions. The length of the questionnaire also made participants feel intimidated.

Furthermore, since the total number of the participants was only from the students majoring in English Language Teaching, the demographics, and experiences in learning English of participants were not used to examine the level of anxiety due to the limited time. Also, the findings from this study only reflected only one small group of learners.

Recommendations for Future Research

The recommendations for further studies are suggested as follows. First, the number of respondents should be increased. This would make the future researchers yield more convincing results. Next, the respondents could be from different fields of study, not just students majoring in English language, in order to compare the level of language anxiety. Lastly, future studies of specific factors related to teachers and class activities could be carried out as such factors were reported to affect learners' anxiety the most.

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