Foreign Language Anxiety of Underprepared Non-English Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

Anxiety has been considered an important affective variable in foreign language education. Much research has been conducted to investigate the impact of anxiety on learning different foreign languages. Recognizing the essential impact of anxiety in learning foreign languages, a number of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) researchers and educators in Taiwan have developed interest in the role of foreign language anxiety on elementary and secondary high school students’ English language learning. However, little research has investigated the impact of anxiety on Taiwanese undergraduate students’ learning English. Among Taiwanese undergraduate students, those non-English-major students can represent the majority of Taiwanese university students known for having more difficulty in learning English. Yet few studies have been devoted specifically to these low-level EFL learners. To bridge the gap, this paper aims to examine the effect of foreign language anxiety on Taiwanese non-English-major college students’ English achievement. A total of 33 non-English-major Taiwanese undergraduate students participated in responding to a questionnaire. The results indicated that these students indeed had comparatively high anxiety in English learning. It was also found that language anxiety and English language learning achievement are negatively related to each

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other. High anxious learners tended to perform relatively and significantly less successfully in their English achievement than those students experiencing a lower anxiety level. Some pedagogical implications for non-English-major undergraduate students’ foreign language anxiety and their English language learning are also discussed.

Key words: anxiety, foreign language learning, English achievement, non-English-major undergraduate students

INTRODUCTION

Recent research has recognized the importance of anxiety on foreign language learning; especially for foreign language learners, anxiety has been identified as a common emotional reaction when they are confronted with the task of listening and speaking in the target foreign language (e.g., Young, 1991). “Approximately one-third of students studying a foreign language experience at least a moderate level of foreign language anxiety” as highlighted by Horwitz, Tallon, and Luo (2010; p. 99). Following the increased emphasis on the role of anxiety in foreign language learning, a growing body of foreign language researchers and educators has been working on foreign language anxiety in relation to learners’ achievement (e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999).

Despite agreement that anxiety plays a crucial role in affecting foreign language learners’ achievement, researchers have not yet reached a definitive conclusion regarding the relationship between anxiety and foreign language learners’ achievement (Kao & Craigie, 2010). As seen in some research, foreign language anxiety contributed to the foreign language learners’ negative feelings, including nervousness, fear, tension, and elevated stress, which were shown to have a negative impact on foreign language performance and ultimately their English achievement (e.g., Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). In contrast to the debilitating effect
of foreign language anxiety, some researchers further pointed out that anxiety might actually enhance foreign language performance since some level of anxiety motivates foreign language learners to make an extra effort to overcome feelings of anxiety (e.g., Steinberg, 1982). In addition to either the debilitating or facilitative effect of anxiety on foreign language learners’ achievement, some other researchers have found no relationship between anxiety and foreign language performance (e.g., Young, 1990).

Previous research has presented some conflicting evidence on the effect of anxiety on foreign language learners’ achievement; in other words, anxiety does not necessarily inhibit foreign language performance but in some cases can actually promote it. Thus, to delve more deeply into the complex relationship between anxiety and foreign language learning, more work needs to be done in this area. Addressing the need, some researchers in different countries have investigated students’ foreign language anxiety and its relationship with their language achievement (e.g., Awan, Azher, Anwar, & Naz, 2010, in Pakistan; Wang, 2014, in China). In Taiwan, a number of EFL researchers and educators have conducted similar research; most of them, however, have focused on the role of foreign language anxiety on elementary and secondary high school students’ English language learning (Chan & Wu, 2004).

Despite some increased attention to the research on Taiwanese elementary and secondary high school students’ foreign language anxiety, there has been little research on Taiwanese undergraduate students’ foreign language anxiety. The Taiwanese Ministry of Education (MOE) has as its policy that all Taiwanese students start learning English from the third grade in elementary school and continue learning till the tertiary level. Therefore, these Taiwanese undergraduate students are expected to have achieved a certain level of English language proficiency over the nearly a decade of English language education. But some researchers have noticed that most undergraduate students, despite their years of English language education, face numerous difficulties in terms of the four aspects of English language skills,
especially English listening and speaking. Some recent research has been conducted with regard to the Taiwanese undergraduate English-major students’ foreign language anxiety (e.g., Kao & Craigie, 2010).

Yet it appears that not many researchers in Taiwan have conducted language anxiety research on undergraduate non-English-major undergraduate students. In contrast to their English-major peers, non-English-major undergraduate students have a comparatively low level of English proficiency and thus more easily experience a feeling of unease while attending college-based EFL classes. This specific group of students may represent the majority of undergraduate students in Taiwan known for having more difficulty in the English learning process, and they have been overlooked by most Taiwanese researchers.

Addressing the issues presented above, there is a need to understand foreign language anxiety in Taiwanese undergraduate non-English-major students’ learning of English. This study thus aims to contribute to the limited literature investigating the effect of foreign language anxiety on Taiwanese non-English-major college students’ English achievement. Both researchers believe that a study like this is expected to serve as a helpful reference to EFL college-based instructors, researchers, and educators. This study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do the non-English-major undergraduate students perceive anxiety in a foreign language classroom? (2) Is there a relationship between the participants’ foreign language anxiety and their achievement in their English courses?

**Methodology**

**Participants**

The participants were recruited from the *Freshmen English Listening & Speaking* course in the College of Agriculture at one national university of science and technology. A total of 33 students volunteered for this study. They all attended standardized English classes in
Taiwanese elementary and secondary schools before entering university. On average, these students had 6-10 years of experience of English learning from primary and secondary schools and the university. All of these participants were taught in the context of learning English as a foreign language, and they had similar backgrounds in learning English. Overall, these 33 students who participated in this study, despite their years of English language education, had relatively low levels of English proficiency, as indicated by their low mean scores on the TOEIC listening practice tests.

**Instruments**

Two instruments, a questionnaire assessing students’ foreign language anxiety level and an English achievement test, were used in this study for data collection. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. One was designed to ask the participants to provide their background information regarding name, age, and years of English language education. Another was the abbreviated Chinese version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, which was adopted from Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope’s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) questionnaire measuring the participants’ English language anxiety level. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale includes five items like, “During the English Listening and Speaking class, I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than me and my own performance in English listening and speaking is the worst,” “I can feel my heart fast-beating when I’m required to speak English in class” and “I worry about the consequences of failing my English listening and speaking class.” The participants were asked to rate each item on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = undecided, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree.

The English achievement test was the final exam administered at the end of the *Freshmen English Listening & Speaking* course. The final exam included three parts: multiple
choice on vocabulary, listening comprehension questions, and speaking questions. All test items were drawn from a test bank, which ensured the reliability of the test paper.

Data Collection

The participants were recruited on a voluntary basis. More specifically, the researchers recruited the students who allowed both researchers to access their responses to the Likert-scale questionnaires submitted online for the course, *Freshmen English Listening & Speaking*, and their final exam scores. A total of 33 students participated in responding to the questionnaire and sharing their English course scores voluntarily and all the data were collected anonymously.

Data Analysis

Data from both the Likert-scale questionnaires and final exam were analyzed. First, a descriptive analysis was performed to report the means and standard deviations for each questionnaire item. Second, a correlation analysis with these participants’ foreign language anxiety and final exam scores was conducted to investigate the effect of anxiety on these participants’ English achievement.

Results & Discussions

Students’ Perceptions of Foreign Language Anxiety

To address the first research question, “How do the non-English-major undergraduate students perceive anxiety in a foreign language classroom,” this section provides detailed information about all the participants’ responses to the foreign language anxiety scale. Figure 1 displays a visual representation of all the participants’ responses to the seven-point Likert questionnaire items in bar graphs and pie charts. As shown in Figure 1, the bar graphs display
all the questionnaire data for these Taiwanese undergraduate non-English-major students’ foreign language anxiety in the *Freshmen English Listening & Speaking* class. The pie chart further represents the percentage of student responses which ranged from 1 to 7.

**Item 1 Fear of negative evaluation**

**Figure 1.**

**Students’ responses to the seven-point Likert questionnaire items**

**Figure 1. Continued**
Based on all the student responses to the questionnaire (see Fig. 1), descriptive statistics were conducted as shown in Table 1, presented in mean and standard deviation. A comparison of the mean scores revealed the differences in these students’ English language anxiety level in the *Freshmen English Listening and Speaking* class, with fear of making mistakes (5.5152) being the highest, test anxiety (4.5758) and communication apprehension (4.5455) being relatively higher than other items, followed by lack of self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation (4.0909) being the lowest. The student responses to Item 3 (5.5152) achieving the highest mean score may show that fear of making mistakes can most easily provoke these non-English-major students’ English language anxiety in the *Freshmen English Listening and Speaking* class, while test anxiety and communication apprehension may be other major reasons why the students were anxious.
Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Fear of negative evaluation</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>1.75648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Communication apprehension</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>1.69726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Fear of making mistakes</td>
<td>5.52</td>
<td>1.76991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Lack of self-confidence</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>2.05327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Test anxiety</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>1.96898</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in the table above, the mean scores of student responses to these five items are all higher than the 4.0 in Foreign Language Anxiety, which is indicative of a high level of anxiety. It was also found that the mean scores of student responses to Item 3 (fear of making mistakes), Item 5 (test anxiety), and Item 2 (communication apprehension) are all higher than 4.50. The data indicate that most students experienced anxiety in the Freshmen English Listening & Speaking classroom, especially the fear of making mistakes, test anxiety, and communication apprehension. Similar to the findings of Chan and Wu’s (2004) study among Taiwanese elementary students and Kao and Craigie’s (2010) study among Taiwanese undergraduate English-major students, this study further indicated this specific group of students, Taiwanese undergraduate non-English-major students, indeed had the feeling of anxiety in their English listening and speaking classroom. They also experienced more fear of making mistakes, test anxiety, and communication apprehension. The existence of the foreign language anxiety of these students can be
attributed to their limited English language proficiency, which was not high enough to allow them to communicate with others freely, express themselves appropriately in class and the English listening and speaking test, and cope with the fear of making mistakes.

**Students’ Foreign Language Anxiety and English Achievement**

In order to address the second research question, “Is there a relationship between the participants’ foreign language anxiety and their achievement in their English course,” a correlation analysis was conducted. As shown in Table 2, the results of the correlation analysis indicated that the participants’ English language anxiety were negatively correlated with their English achievement (-.385, p = 0.027 < 0.05). The significance of such a negative correlation between these participants’ English language anxiety and their English achievement indicates that the high anxious learners tended to perform relatively and significantly less successfully in their English achievement than those students experiencing a lower level of anxiety.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LA and English Achievement</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>-.385*</td>
<td>.027</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

As seen in Table 2, the correlation analysis conducted in this study indicated the negative correlation between the participants’ anxiety and English achievement. High anxious learners tended to perform relatively and significantly less successfully in their English achievement than those students experiencing a lower anxiety level. The results of the present study support the findings of other Taiwanese researchers and educators’ studies on foreign language anxiety that asserted the negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and English achievement (e.g., Cheng, 2005; Cui, 2011; Kao & Craigie, 2010; Wu, 2005). Similar to the previous studies, the results obtained in the current study show a negative relationship...
between language anxiety and English achievement, especially English listening and speaking. The negative relationship between language anxiety and English achievement identified in this study has provided some evidence for the debilitating effect of language anxiety on the participants’ English performance.

**Conclusion and Implications**

This paper has presented some findings regarding the students’ perceptions of foreign language anxiety in the classroom and the effect of foreign language anxiety on the students’ English achievement. It was found that most of these Taiwanese undergraduate non-English-major students experienced anxiety in the *Freshmen English Listening and Speaking* classroom, especially the fear of making mistakes, test anxiety, and communication apprehension. Moreover, the results show that their language anxiety and English achievement are negatively related to each other. Such results indicate that for these EFL learners, language anxiety negatively influences their English achievement; this means that the students with a higher level of language anxiety tended to perform at lower levels than those with lower anxiety. So we can see that language anxiety has debilitating effects on low-achievers’ English language achievement.

Given the results that anxiety is prevalent in Taiwanese undergraduate non-English-major students in *Freshmen English Listening and Speaking* classrooms, our results further show that anxiety is related to poor English achievement for these EFL learners. Different from some researchers’ argument that anxiety can potentially motivate students to study harder (Steinberg, 1982), we did not find highly anxious students produce good English achievement. Instead, the results indicated that these undergraduate non-English-major students’ foreign language anxiety affected their English achievement significantly and negatively. Foreign language anxiety existed among these low-level EFL learners and could
pose challenges to these students’ learning of English, resulting in their lower English performance. Hence, these results highlight a need to reduce students’ anxiety in learning English. In Freshmen English speaking and listening classrooms, teachers need to create a relaxing classroom atmosphere for making low-level EFL students feel comfortable to speak and express their views. Teachers need to instruct these students to embrace mistakes and anxiety in foreign language learning classrooms. Teachers need to explicitly tell students the inevitability of the existence of mistakes and anxiety in English learning. Both mistakes and anxiety can be an essential part of learning a foreign language. Instead of helping students get rid of anxiety completely, teachers need to help students reduce anxiety to the adequate level, neither too high nor too low.

**References**


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Literature