

## Language Anxiety in Adult Second Language Learners: A Case Study

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### Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a study of language anxiety of an adult second language (L2) learner. The investigation aimed at exploring the *latent constructs* in anxiety in a case study research design of an adult L2 learner who learnt English as an L2. The problem investigated was to examine why the student had been silent for eight months and the causes for his silence. The objectives were to identify the role of anxiety in learning English and assess its impact on learning English. This 'single case' case study research design explored the silence of the student and the causes behind it. An interview schedule and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) of Horwitz et al. (1986) were used to collect data. Findings indicated that the student had language anxiety, trait anxiety and test anxiety. The recommendations included creating a stress-free class environment, developing an easy, supportive, and friendly demeanour towards correcting errors and desensitising the learner to the class and English language. Any classroom activity that leads to anxiety should be avoided, and in place of such activities, personalised and individualised activities may be provided.

*Keywords:* Anxiety, nervousness, performance, trait, variable.

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## Introduction

Anxiety is a feeling of apprehension, nervousness, tension, and worry associated with quick arousal of the autonomic nervous system. Three types of anxiety: trait, state, and situation-specific are concerns of interest in L2 learning research. Test anxiety is another variation of anxiety researchers are interested in.

*Xenoglossophobia* is the term used (in psychiatry and psychology) to refer to anxiety. It is the feeling of apprehension, nervousness, worry and unease. Anxiety is a learner-specific endogenous variable. If a learner feels anxious, he develops some noticeable physical and psychological discomforts. These feelings are experienced in learning an L2 or foreign language (FL). These feelings are likely to be experienced in any L2 context, with productive or receptive skills. Xenoglossophobia affects many L2 learners, and if learners have passed *puberty*, they are likely to show more discomfort. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) are two leading researchers of foreign language anxiety (FLA), who theoretically advanced three approaches to studying anxiety: trait, state, and situation-specific anxiety.

## A psychological construct

Language anxiety, as a learner variable, has gained attention, and research has shown different views. Anxiety is a psychological construct, and it is a normal stress reaction, and it may be beneficial to some learners on some occasions. FLA<sup>1</sup> differs from normal feelings of nervousness.

## Trait anxiety

Trait anxiety is a debilitating psychological condition that refers to a strong, stable tendency to experience and report negative emotions—fear, worry, and anxiety. Trait anxiety, for example, is manifested by repeated concerns about and reporting symptoms (usually physical). Trait anxiety is characterised by a stable perception of environmental stimuli (events, statements of others) as threatening. Trait-anxious<sup>2</sup> learners often experience and express state anxiety in situations in which most people do not experience such responses.

## State anxiety

Behaviour is usually motivated by emotions—in an L2 context, emotions impact the health and psychological well-being of L2 learners. Language anxiety is an organic response of an individual; anxiety entails apprehension and surveillance in situations where learners see danger or potential threats to their integrity. Anxiety experienced in language learning is a

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<sup>1</sup> FLA involves excessive anxiety or fear when learners are required to participate in activities that expose them to contexts in which they are required to perform linguistic tasks (language-related tasks). This state is a predicament for some L2 learners, and they undergo severe mental and physical discomfort.

<sup>2</sup> Trait anxiety seems person-specific and may affect some learners more seriously than others.

common condition—chronicity, distress, and functional impairment may lead to low L2 performance; not only those but also physical, psychological, emotional, and behavioural symptoms are also noted in learners who have anxiety.

### Situation-specific anxiety

Situation-specific anxiety, which builds on state anxiety, is when a particular situation induces anxiety only when specific conditions (E.g., an L2) are at play.

### Review of literature

Trait anxiety may be termed 'endogenous' while situation-specific anxiety may be called 'exogenous' as situations are peripheral and not internal to an individual. These terms are intended to indicate whether anxiety comes from an internal cause (genetics) or external causes, or situations. Research conducted on xenoglossophobia has produced mixed results. Recent and latest developments in research into the nature of anxiety in language learning show that language anxiety is a determinant of language proficiency. Javed, Eng, Mohamed and Sam (2013) reported that "it is a permanent mental disorder whereas 'the state and situation-specific anxiety generally are associated with any particular occasion or happening" (p. 1564).

Huang and Liu (2011) concluded that "meanwhile, (over) emphasising learning English for a utilitarian purpose may result in (extra) pressure and anxiety in learners, which may ultimately debilitate their performance in English" (p. 6). Levin's (2003) view was that "research also indicates that teachers' perception of students' language anxiety may sometimes be incongruent with students' perception" (p. 346). Motivation and anxiety have a causal effect. Huang and Liu (2011) confirmed that "as such, to better students' performance in English, it is necessary for any language teacher and learner to take preventive measures to reduce the level of anxiety, since anxiety turned out to be the most powerful and negative predictor for the student's performance in English" (p. 6). Research has been conducted on how negative, and positive anxiety affect/facilitate language learning. Shih and Chang (2018) concluded that "negative L2 experiences resulted in a high level of language learning anxiety, whereas positive experiences lowered the levels of anxiety associated with L2 learning" (p. 155).

Chen and Liu (2014) concluded that "students tended to be anxious when (1) feeling that their peers had better performance in English than they did, (2) being called to speak in the target language in front of the class, and (3) worrying about being left behind the English class" (p. 9). García-Santillán, Santana, and Escalera-Chávez (2017) added that "one final decisive affective factor is language anxiety which is the object of several studies" (p. 140).

Anxiety may be reduced through intervention plans conducted in the teaching and learning process. Cheng and Zheng (2018) concluded that "the findings showed that the

teachers' anxiety-reducing strategy intervention plan led to a decreased level of learners' foreign language anxiety (p. 3)". However, their study was limited to "the cyclical relationship between anxiety and performance, as students experience repeated failure, their anxiety levels tend to increase gradually, was not confirmed in this study" (ibid. p. 14). Salehi (2014) concluded that "the findings of this study reveal that both language anxiety and test anxiety have a debilitating role in language learning, at least in settings similar to those in this study" (p. 937). His research insight suggests that anxiety has a debilitating effect on learners.

Research has also been done to explore a relationship between personality type and language learning anxiety. "A further subject requiring examination is the relation between the learner's personality type and language acquisition anxiety" (Abu-Rabia, Peleg & Shakkour, 2013, p. 11). Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) investigated the connection between L2 anxiety and perfectionist traits and concluded that "perfectionists set standards of performance that are accompanied by a high self-criticism level, expecting themselves to achieve L2 fluency without mistakes or mispronunciation" (p. 126). The relationship between gender and anxiety has also been researched. Sung and Li (2019) concluded that "inconsistent results have been found with the variable of gender in anxiety research" (p. 4).

### **Research problem**

Language production involves complex psycholinguistic processes. Some L2 students remain silent in L2 classes. L2 learners are likely to experience xenoglossophobia when required to use a target language such as the English language. Trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety are variables that are attributed to learners' silence. The inability to produce language concerns ELT practitioners. Remaining silent when L2 learners are required to speak is a concern and the reasons for remaining silent in an L2 context need extensive research investigations.

### **Research question**

In conducting the research study, the research questions that guided the study were: Why do some L2 learners remain silent in an L2 classroom, what causes them to remain silent; why and how anxiety affects L2 learners, what is the role of anxiety in learning an L2 and why should teachers be concerned about them.

### **Aims and objectives**

This investigation aimed at examining what type of anxiety influences learning English or affects learning English. These aims are achieved through the attainment of the following objectives.

## Objectives

1. To investigate the causes of anxiety
2. To identify the role of anxiety that affects learning English
3. To examine the relationship between learning styles and anxiety
4. To outline the types of anxiety: trait, state, and situation-specific anxiety
5. To formulate a new perspective on how anxiety affects adult learners of English

## Significance

There are several research studies done on the impact of anxiety on adult language learning; however, the research studies conducted are far from consistent in their conclusions on the detrimental effects of anxiety on adults. Hence, this case study aimed at validating the detrimental effects of anxiety.

## Materials and methods

I used a 'single case' case study research design. The student was selected after careful observation in the class. A researcher-designed interview schedule and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) were the instruments. The FLCAS is a 33-item, five-point Likert scale questionnaire; the instruments were researcher-administered. The student was observed for eight months, and after eight months, he was asked to answer the questionnaire. I obtained informed consent from the student after explaining the reason behind investigating his anxiety. A rider to the questionnaire was attached, and it contained all the necessary conditions and how he could answer/withdraw responses to any question if he felt that his privacy was compromised or intruded upon. The data were subjected to some statistical analysis to present findings.

## The case

In this case study, only one L2 learner participated in the study. This learner is an adult L2 learner who has passed his Ordinary Level Examination in the Sinhala medium. He has failed the English language. He is 36 years, single and started learning English late in life. He has attended thirteen (13) English classes but could not master English from them. He has had unpleasant memories of every English class he attended, and he has even taken a course at a leading higher education institute. The case showed signs of *hypersensitivity*; he starts perspiring, his palms get wet, he rubs his palms against his handkerchief, and he becomes silent. Socio-economically, he belongs to a middle-class family. Though he is weak in English, he is ambitious, and later, he did an advanced diploma in engineering. He is employed and works for a company where he is a data associate. The student is currently reading for a master's degree though he has limited proficiency in English.

## Findings

Nuwan<sup>3</sup> mentioned that he felt anxious in class and felt anxious in any similar classroom settings where he was required to use the English language. Also, he said that he began shivering even at the very prospect of hearing that he was required to stand up and use the English language. Furthermore, according to him, he was scared to stand up in front of the class and speak in English. This made him tremble and perspire heavily. He was uneasy. He was anxious and scared when he was asked to talk to the class on a topic or requested to make a presentation. These points bring us to the assumption that he had trait anxiety.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Zero-order Correlations of Anxiety Variables*

Factor	No. of Variables	Mean	SD	Reliability	Correlation		
					F1	F2	F3
Class anxiety (F1)	30	42.36	8.61	.64			
Test confidence (F2)	10	13.54	5.28	.67	-.35		
Test anxiety (F3)	13	11.31	7.04	.53	.48	-.41	

F=factor

In addition, he showed situation-specific anxiety on several occasions. He stammered when he was asked to introduce his company manager in a classroom presentation. As it was a classroom assessment, he was anxious and could not express his ideas. He was speechless, looked at me for some seconds and started speaking in a low tone inaudible to the class. This behaviour is also related to test anxiety; however, more than test anxiety, he showed situation-specific anxiety because it was a situation in which he had to perform so that his performance could be evaluated. Test anxiety was also noted in his performance. He was anxious, started perspiring, his face became reddish, and he began wiping off the sweat on his face. He was scared to make the presentation.

<sup>3</sup> I used a fictitious name instead of his actual name.

**Table 2***Predicting Compulsive Exercise Test 3 - Performance*

	Unstandardized		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig
	B	Std. error	Beta		
Test confidence	3.31	.58	.25	5.31	.00
Test anxiety	ˆ1.22	.26	ˆ.19	ˆ4.964	.00

Dependent Variable: CET - 3

Class anxiety was severe, as noted in the above table. Significantly, he was anxious when it was time to perform in class. He had high situation-specific class anxiety, and he almost struggled to speak English. Time brought him some ease, but his performance was below the expected level in the class.

### Recommendations

As the study findings showed, anxiogenic classrooms cause anxiety; L2 learners with anxiety tend to avoid anxiety-causing situations, hence, the teacher can take preventive measures and create a supportive classroom culture. As per the findings of this case study, I recommend that those teachers who have learners with anxiety, use personalised and individualised lessons that may help such learners feel secure in the class. As the study further reported, it is good if the teacher creates a stress-free classroom where the stress is low, and the learner experiences no stress at all. Further, as revealed in the study findings, a supportive and friendly classroom culture may also be recommended. While it is hard to create anxiolytic classrooms due to several factors external to the learner and teacher, it is good if the teacher has some insight into the nature, causes, remedial measures, and behaviour of L2 learners experiencing anxiety.

### The learning environment

As research insight showed, in helping any student with anxiety, care should be taken if the learning environment leads to treatment-refractory anxiety. Any activity that provokes anxiety should be avoided, and in place of such activities, personalised and individualised activities may help learners perform. The use of progressive exposure methods (linguistic and pedagogic) and techniques in desensitising learners to decrease the avoidance of what anxious students fear most may be implemented in class. Choosing different teaching modalities may be determined by a combination of learner preferences and time availability with the teacher.

## Recognising learners with anxiety

Recognising L2 learners with anxiety, as the research findings indicated, can also be recommended. Further, the teacher can learn the unease, nervousness, apprehension, and disquietude of learners, and this identification may be a clue to spot students with anxiety—if the teacher is observant, she can recognise learners with anxiety. Even using FLCAS may help the teacher remedy anxiety, and she can create an anxietytic classroom environment.

## The teacher's role

As it was indicated in the research findings, FLA is low in an anxietytic class environment where the teacher and learners are supportive, and mistakes (or errors) are tolerated; reducing anxiety, desensitising learners, and creating a conducive learning environment is the teacher's task. The teacher can maintain a friendly classroom ambience may also be a good classroom management technique; in a more relaxed classroom, learning is optimal, and learners enjoy being at a school where there is low anxiety and stress and where a learner's strengths are valued.

## Further research

A study of how female adult L2 learners experience anxiety should also be conducted, and if it is possible, employed female learners should be selected as the sample.

## Conclusion

A learner with foreign language anxiety does not become less anxious over time, and he continues to feel anxious because his anxiety is related to several factors. A learner with state language anxiety will be less anxious over time and will be more comfortable with the L2. In the case of the student that I observed, it was noted that after the student became motivated to learn English, his anxiety started decreasing noticeably; however, his trait anxiety did not decrease. Some gender-related influences and causes lead to foreign language anxiety.

This 'single case' case study reported findings based on the data gathered from a male L2 learner. To document the three types of anxiety, trait, state and situation-specific—further research studies are needed, especially how female adult L2 learners experience anxiety should be investigated. As this is a 'single case' case study, a survey or an ethnographic study involving a large sample is required for comprehensive documentation.



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