

An Investigation into Undergraduate EFL Students' English Language Anxiety: a Case Study in the Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University, Thailand

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Abstract

This study investigated undergraduate EFL students' English language anxiety. The objectives of the study were 1) to study English language anxiety of English major students in EFL classroom, 2) to compare English language anxiety of English major students from years 1 to 4, 3) to compare English language anxiety of students in different language levels. All participants were English major students (70 first year, 86 second year, 67 third year and 62 fourth year, in total 285 students). The research instrument used in this study was the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scales (FLCAS). The collected data were analysed by using mean, standard deviation and One-Way ANOVA. The result revealed that all students experienced moderate level of English language anxiety. There was no significant difference in the students' English language anxiety based on the students' academic year. However, the results showed a significant difference in the students' English language anxiety according to their language levels.

Keywords: English language anxiety, EFL students

การศึกษาความวิตกกังวลในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษของนิสิตระดับปริญญาตรีที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ : กรณีศึกษา คณะมนุษยศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยนเรศวร ประเทศไทย

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ศึกษาความวิตกกังวลในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษของนิสิตระดับปริญญาตรีที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ จุดประสงค์ของงานวิจัยคือ 1. ศึกษาความวิตกกังวลของนิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ 2. เปรียบเทียบความวิตกกังวลของนิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษชั้นปีที่ 1 ถึงชั้นปีที่ 4 3. เปรียบเทียบความวิตกกังวลของนิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษที่มีระดับภาษาอังกฤษที่แตกต่างกัน ผู้เข้าร่วมโครงการวิจัยคือนิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษ (ปี 1 จำนวน 70 คน ปี 2 จำนวน 86 คน ปี 3 จำนวน 67 คน ปี 4 จำนวน 62 คน รวม 285 คน) เครื่องมือวิจัยคือ แบบสอบถามความวิตกกังวลในการเรียนภาษาต่างประเทศ สถิติที่ใช้ในการวิจัยคือ ค่าเฉลี่ย ส่วนเบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน และการวิเคราะห์ความแปรปรวน One-Way

ANOVA ผลการวิจัยพบว่า นิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษมีความวิตกกังวลในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษระดับปานกลาง และพบว่าความวิตกกังวลของนิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษในแต่ละชั้นปีไม่มีความแตกต่างกันอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติ แต่นิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษที่มีระดับภาษาอังกฤษที่ต่างกันมีความวิตกกังวลที่ต่างกันอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติ

คำสำคัญ: ความวิตกกังวลในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ ผู้เรียนที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

1. Introduction

English language has been taught as a compulsory course from primary to university students for all Thai students and English subject scores are required for all Thai private and public university admissions. The average scores of English for year 12 students across the country are quite low: the scores for English in the academic years 2015-2017 were 24.98, 27.76, and 28.31 from 100, (National Institute of Educational Testing, 2019). Simpson (2017) mentioned that a majority of Thai students still encounter difficulty in using the English language effectively even though they have studied for more than 10 years. Language anxiety is one of the important factors influencing second language or foreign language learning (Khasinah, 2014). Some language learners feel more anxious than others learners in different situations. However, language anxiety can be seen from beginners to advanced students in different phases of learning a second or foreign language (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). MacIntyre & Gardner (1994) defined language anxiety as a feeling of worry, irritation, hesitation and pressure while learning or performing the target language. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) categorised situation-specific performance anxieties into 3 types: 1) *communication apprehension*, the feeling of nervousness while listening to the foreign or second language or performing the target language in groups or public arena due to language limitations; 2) *fear of negative evaluation*, the feeling of discomfort and insecurity when thinking that they will be evaluated negatively by teachers and classmates while in class or being judged by others in a social situation (Piechurska & Kuciel, 2008); 3) *test anxiety*, the feeling of uneasiness towards academic evaluation or fear of failing in exams. It was found that more than half of all foreign language learners expressed anxiety and nervousness while learning the target language (Worde, 1998). This becomes a barrier and obstructs the success of language learning. Recently, a number of researchers explored university and vocational students' foreign language anxiety (e.g. Naudhani, Wu, Naudhani, 2018; Sae-tia & Sukharom, 2017; Alsowat, 2016; Chinpakdee, 2015; Namsang, 2011; Parauwat, 2011). They investigated the English language anxiety between college years, faculties,

student majors and other factors resulting in anxiety. However, there is a lack of investigation as to whether language levels affect Thai EFL learners' foreign language anxiety in a Thai EFL context. In addition, this study focused on English major students and attempted to investigate whether the college years would influence their English language anxiety.

This study was undertaken in a comprehensive Thai government university where English language subjects are compulsory for all student in all faculties for their first three years of study. However, English major students undertake intensive English learning for four years to develop their receptive skills and to acquire productive proficiencies studying English linguistics, British and American literature and various English for specific purposes courses. As the samples were English major students from years 1 – 4, the results from this study may not be applicable to the students in other programs. However, this research could assist EFL teachers with an overview of the level of student anxiety majoring in English and the differences in language anxiety of students in different years of study. Having an awareness of the students 'anxiety' allows the teachers to design their teaching and learning environment ensuring their students are motivated and engaged in learning.

2. Research Questions

1. To what extent did the English major students experience English language anxiety in the EFL classroom?
2. What were the differences of the English language anxiety among year 1 to year 4 students majoring in English?
3. Did differences exist in the students' English language anxiety based on their language levels?

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 285 (70 first year, 86 second year, 67 third year, and 62 fourth year) English major students, Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University.

The students were categorized into 5 language levels based on the scores from their latest Cambridge English Placement Test (CEPT) in the academic year of 2018. Of the 285 participants, nearly half of the participants obtained "A2" (49.1%) "B1" (37.2%), "B2" (9.5%), "A1" (3.5%) and 0.7% obtained "C".

3.2 Instrument

The questionnaire of this study was developed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) and translated into Thai for clear understanding by Namsang (2011), the participants were to rate 33 items in the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scales (FLCAS) questionnaire.

The rating criteria are a five point Likert scale:

5 = Strongly Agree 4 = Agree 3 = Moderate

2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly disagree

3.3 Data Analysis

The questionnaires were analyzed using the statistical package for the social science (SPSS) which included means and standard deviation (SD) for research question 1 and One-Way ANOVA for research question 2 and 3 to determine if there were differences in students' anxiety in accordance with the students' college year and in terms of their language levels. The criteria of English language anxiety that were established to indicate the ranges of opinions were shown below.

4.51 – 5.00 means Strongly Agree

3.51 – 4.50 means Agree

2.51 – 3.50 means Moderate

1.51 – 2.50 means Disagree

1.00 – 1.50 means Strongly Disagree

4. Results

The result of descriptive analysis presented below aimed to investigate the overall language anxiety of the English major students in Years 1 - 4.

Table 1: The overall anxiety level of English major students

College Year	Participants	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Level of Anxiety
1	70	2.55	4.21	3.19	0.40	Moderate
2	86	1.97	4.03	3.20	0.39	Moderate
3	67	2.30	4.15	3.18	0.40	Moderate
4	62	2.30	4.55	3.27	0.49	Moderate
Total	285	1.97	4.55	3.21	0.42	Moderate

The findings revealed that overall the students experienced moderate level of English language anxiety, the fourth year students reported the highest level of anxiety, followed by the second year, and followed by the first year students, interestingly the third year students were the lowest.

The following table illustrated level of each type of language anxiety of English major students experienced in an EFL classroom.

Table 2: The anxiety level of each factor related to students' college year

College year	Communication apprehension			Fear of negative evaluation			Test anxiety		
	Mean	SD	Interpretation	Mean	SD	Interpretation	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1	3.21	0.48	Moderate	3.16	0.40	Moderate	3.25	0.53	Moderate
2	3.25	0.46	Moderate	3.15	0.41	Moderate	3.22	0.49	Moderate
3	3.29	0.50	Moderate	3.09	0.38	Moderate	3.15	0.49	Moderate
4	3.34	0.59	Moderate	3.20	0.50	Moderate	3.35	0.62	Moderate
Total	3.27	0.50	Moderate	3.15	0.42	Moderate	3.24	0.53	Moderate

The findings revealed that the differences of students' college year did not influence the level of anxiety as year 1-4 students experienced moderate levels of anxiety during their English language learning. When looking closely at each factor, the students reported that the highest level of anxiety was Communication apprehension followed by Test anxiety and Fear of negative evaluation the lowest.

The below table demonstrated the differences of English language anxiety among year 1 – year 4 students majoring in English.

Table 3: The descriptive statistics of the students' English language anxiety in accordance with the students' college years

ANOVA					
avg_total					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.359	3	.120	.674	.569
Within Groups	49.928	281	.178		
Total	50.287	284			

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

It appeared there was no significant statistical difference in the students' English language anxiety according to the students' college year. The result of ANOVA test demonstrated that the students' college year did not affect their English language anxiety. Tables 4 and 5 presented the differences in students' English language anxiety related to their language levels.

Table 4: The overall anxiety level of English major students in terms of their language level

CEPT Level	Participants	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Level of Anxiety
A1	10	2.97	4.03	3.48	0.33	Medium
A2	140	2.27	4.52	3.26	0.38	Medium
B1	106	2.15	4.36	3.13	0.40	Medium
B2	27	1.91	4.30	3.07	0.50	Medium
C	2	2.64	3.03	2.83	0.28	Medium
Total	285	1.91	4.52	3.20	0.41	Medium

The findings revealed that students with A1, A2, B1, B2 and C1 language levels had moderate anxiety. It was shown that the students with C1 reported the lowest anxiety, followed by B2 group, B1 group, A2 and A1 group the highest level of anxiety.

Table 5: The descriptive statistics of the students' English language anxiety in terms of their language levels

ANOVA					
avg_total					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.581	4	.645	4.014	.003*
Within Groups	45.002	280	.161		
Total	47.582	284			

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 5 showed that there was a significant difference in the students' English language anxiety according to their language level. The ANOVA test's result showed that the English language level differentiation had an impact on their English language anxiety. The language anxiety of A1 group was different from B1 group (sig 0.007), B2 (0.006), and C group (0.037). Furthermore, the language anxiety of A2 group was different from B1 group (sig 0.011), and B2 group (0.027), this indicated there was a difference between groups.

5. Discussion

EFL students are normally nervous and anxious when speaking with native speakers, in front of the class, or in front of an audience (Rajanthran & Ainawati, 2013). However, this study indicated Communication Apprehension as the high level of anxiety although shown as the highest level of anxiety, it was at a moderate level. This finding is in contrast to the finding by Latif (2015) of adult learners' English language anxiety in the University Technology Malaysia (UTM) and the findings by Namsang (2011) and Chinpakdee (2015) on non-English major Thai undergraduates' English language anxiety, both studies reported that Test Anxiety was the highest level of anxiety, followed by Communication Apprehension. The English major students in this study were more concerned with their oral skills and classroom participation due to their anxiety and an awareness of the shortcomings of their language skills when required to participate in presentations or listening and responding to requests with other students.

As a part of the English language assessment at this university, ongoing assessments are needed to check the learner progress through ongoing activities. Assessments are regularly found in

English major sections normally with fewer students whereas non- English major classes with larger numbers of students are likely to focus on quizzes, midterm and final exams.

Students choosing English language as their major need a positive attitude towards English language and motivated to learn as their aim is to work and collaborate with English speaking people or organisations. It follows that being able to effectively and fluently communicate with English speaking contacts or clients shows that they are professionals and ready for their future career.

Previous studies have shown that adult learners and non-English major undergraduate students had the highest anxiety in Test Anxiety while in this current study it came second. Aydm (2009) concluded that many factors are associated with test anxiety among language learners; for example, test format, test procedures, test duration, test environment, language proficiency, student gender, and social background. Therefore, teachers and examiners require training and understanding of the above factors to effectively ease the Test Anxiety of students.

Overall, the English major students in this study experienced moderate levels of communication anxiety, an indication that further support with authentic oral communication situations is required to enhance their conversation skills. With a moderate to low level of anxiety, they are more likely to react differently with less emphasis on anxiety coping strategies compared to their more anxious associates. It is important that EFL teachers identify the main anxiety of their students and individual student and develop appropriate and meaningful strategies as a means to reduce their anxiety in communication in English in class. Giving students time to prepare, providing support, encouragement, and meaningful direction from teachers and peers can assist in reducing anxiety (Mohamed Noor, Rafek, Megat Khalid, Mohammad, 2015).

This study has indicated there was significant difference in the students' English language anxiety appropriate to their language level. The finding was in line with Kao and Craigie (2010) study's finding. The finding revealed that the high-level students show less anxiety than the low-levels students. Many researchers have reported on the relationship of English language anxiety on both high and low level language learners (Amiri & Ghonsooly, 2015; Ying, 2017; Dordinejad & Ahmadabad, 2014; Kao & Craigie, 2010). This implies there could be a need for guidance and strategies from instructors at all levels of learners to be applied and utilized as a means to reduce anxiety with language learning.

Nonetheless, this current study indicates the higher level of English language competency, the less language anxiety experienced. Further, higher proficiency learners are likely to be motivated and aware of the importance of English, this in turn reduces the anxiety of learning the language

(Liu and Huang, 2011). Wiland and Singhasiri (2017) underlined that as anxiety decreases, the comprehension and the precision increase.

High levels of language anxiety can be caused by many factors: the differences of culture, status of interlocutors, class activities, learning environment, the learner's learning styles and learners' own language (Yiamsawat, 2016). In addition, the lack of target language knowledge and their language learning experience can impact and increase the tension on language learners (Tóth, 2011). Therefore, EFL teachers play a vital role in assisting the language learners to achieve the goals of the target language; resulting in more motivation and confidence in the use of the language (Hashemi, 2011).

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