

Anxiety in Learning English among Thai Undergraduates: Effects on Listening Abilities

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Abstract

Several studies have revealed that anxiety can hinder success in foreign language learning, and it is estimated that one-third of foreign language learners suffer from foreign language anxiety. To minimize learners' foreign language anxiety, it is important for language teachers to identify the types and levels of learners' anxiety in language classes. Consequently, the purposes of this study were to investigate the types and level of anxiety among Thai undergraduates when they learned English in a Thai university context. Furthermore, it aimed to examine the differences between male and female students and their levels of English proficiency whether they were influenced by their anxiety. The relationship between students' listening abilities and the anxiety were also explored. The participants were 40 undergraduates ranging from 24 males and 16 females. Data were collected by two-set questionnaires and open-ended questions. Statistical analyses used were Descriptive Statistics, Independent-Samples T-Test, and Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. Results revealed that

Thai learners had medium anxiety ($M = 3.12$). The highest anxiety among the participants was that even if they were well prepared for language class, they still felt anxious ($M = 3.70$), whereas the lowest anxiety was they were worried about getting left behind if language classes moved so quickly ($M = 2.55$). Females had higher level of anxiety than males did. Female students felt frightened when they were given negative evaluation ($p = .008$). Moreover, the learners' levels of English proficiency did not affect their language anxiety. The high proficient students had higher anxiety than the lower proficient students did. Finally, there was no significant relationship between students' listening abilities and their anxiety ($r = .259, p < .01$).

Keywords: *anxiety, gender difference, language learning, listening, and Thai undergraduate*

Introduction

There have been many educators in foreign language learning examining the problems and difficulties of foreign language learners (Ganschow, Sparks, Anderson, Javorshy, Skinner & Jon, 1994). They indicate that learners who have difficulty with foreign language learning are often considered as underachievers, less motivated learners (Chen & Chang, 2004; Tercanlioglu, 2004) or learners who have some language learning disabilities (Reed & Stansfield, 2004). Other factors that may influence foreign language learning are affective variables such as attitude, motivation, anxiety and beliefs. Amongst these affective factors, anxiety has been given much attention.

Anxiety, in general, is defined as a psychological construct which is described as a state of apprehension, and a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object (Hilgard, Atkinson, & Atkinson, 1971). Anxiety has some effects on several types of learning

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including second or foreign language learning. Horwitz et al. (1986) define foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. Foreign language anxiety can occur when learners are exposed to several negative experiences in a foreign language context (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994; Chen and Chang, 2004; Sparks and Ganschow, 2007; Hewitt and Stephenson, 2012). The negative experiences can “make learners get discouraged, lose faith in their abilities, escape from participating in classroom activities, and even give up the effort to learn a language well” (Na, 2007). Learners with high anxiety tend to perform their language abilities at lower levels than those with lower anxiety (Cui, 2011). Moreover, they are likely to have low self-esteem, low sense of competitiveness, communication apprehension, and lack of positive attitudes and beliefs towards language learning (Young, 1994)

Horwitz et al. (1986) classify foreign language anxiety into three categories, that is, communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. First, communication apprehension is characterized by fear and anxiety in communicating with people. Foreign language learners have difficulty not only in speaking but also comprehending messages from others. In other words, learners have difficulty in understanding others or in being understood. This causes learners become shy and keep silent in the language classes. Second, test anxiety is a type of performance anxiety which is caused by fear of failing a test. Test anxious students often put unrealistic demands on themselves. Test anxiety is considered to be one of the most important aspects of negative motivation which affects learning. This type of fear is defined as an unpleasant feeling or emotional state that associates with both learners’ physiology and their behaviors while taking formal tests or other evaluative situations. Finally, fear of negative evaluation is the apprehension about other people’s evaluations. This includes the avoidance of evaluative situations and the expectations that others might evaluate them negatively. Learners with fear of negative evaluation tend to perceive themselves as inadequate and are often scared of other’s opinions or evaluations about themselves. Besides, foreign language anxiety may potentially stem from various sources such as instructional practices, learners’ competence, task types, and teachers’ behaviors (Horwitz, 2001). Young (1991) proposed six causes of foreign language anxiety including personal and interpersonal anxiety, learners’ belief in language learning, instructors’ belief in language teaching, the interaction between learners and instructor in classes, classroom management, and testing. Thus, it can be concluded that the sources of foreign language anxiety involve learners’ internal factors such as personal anxiety and their belief in language learning and external factors such as the interaction between learners and instructor in classes and classroom management. To minimize learners’ foreign language anxiety, Horwitz et al. (1986) suggest that it is important for language teachers to identify the types of learners’ anxiety in language classes because it can help the teachers realize and reduce the causes and levels of foreign language anxiety occurring in the learners themselves efficiently. It is also useful for the teachers in managing learning methodologies, learning materials, learning environment, and evaluation process suiting the particular learners.

There have been numerous studies examining the effects of anxiety in language classes and the relationship between foreign language anxiety and learning achievement. For example, Krashen (1985) found that the anxious learners had difficulty in processing meaningful input and they became less responsive to language output. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) indicated that the anxious learners could not express their own opinions properly, and they were likely to underestimate their own abilities. Sellers (2000) explained

more anxious learners in reading tended to recall less passage content than less anxious learners did, and they experienced more off-task interfering their thoughts while reading than their less anxious counterparts, whereas Djigunovic (2006) reported that the high anxious learners in speaking produced longer texts and smaller amounts of continuous speech. They also had longer mid-clause pauses, made fewer repetitions, and made more false starts than the low anxious learners did. However, there have been some studies revealed that there was no a significant relationship between language anxiety and learning achievement (Wang, 2003; Lei, 2004; and Tang, 2005). From these studies, language anxiety may be influenced by some other factors such as gender, culture, years of study, and learners' language proficiency. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the types and level of language anxiety among Thai undergraduates when they learned English; and to examine the differences between male and female learners and their levels of English proficiency whether they were influenced by their anxiety. Lastly, the relationship between learners' listening abilities and the language anxiety were also explored because listening is an essential skill which develops faster than speaking and often affects the development of reading and writing abilities in learning a new language (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992; Oxford, 1993). In addition, listening ability is considered as a barrier as language anxiety for language learners. Both of them cause the learners hardly succeed in their target language

Research Questions

The research questions in the present study are following:

- 1) What types and level of English language anxiety do the undergraduates at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (TNI) experience?
- 2) Do learners' gender and their levels of English proficiency affect their anxiety in English learning?
- 3) Is there any relationship between learners' listening abilities and English language anxiety?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 40 students who completed three English compulsory courses and enrolled in the elective English course: ENL-411 English through Multimedia in the second semester in 2015 academic year. There were 24 males and 16 females from three different faculties at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (TNI). They were selected through the purposive sampling method on the basis of convenience and availability.

Instruments

Two instruments were used for this study. First, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scales (FLCAS), which was developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), was used to identify and measure learners' foreign language anxiety. It consists of 33 items using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1-5, namely, *strongly agree* = 5, *agree* = 4, *neutral* = 3, *disagree* = 2, *strongly disagree* = 1. It has a high reliability (α) at .89. The questionnaire is divided into two parts: The first part is used for gathering the participants' demographic data: sex, year of study, major, faculty, and the average of English grade. The second part is used for investigating the types and level of participants' anxiety in learning English in formal classes. All 33 items are categorized into 4 categories – communication anxiety, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and English classroom anxiety. Second, listening strategies questionnaire, which is widely used for learners in Asian contexts, was used to identify the

types and level of learners' abilities in listening. It has a high reliability (α) at .89. The questionnaire consists of 30 items using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, that is, *never use* = 1, *rarely use* = 2, *sometimes use* = 3, *frequently use* = 4, and *always use* = 5. All 30 items were categorized into 5 categories – metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, memory strategies, and affective strategies.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) for Microsoft Windows 11.5 was used. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, means (M), standard deviations (SD) were implemented to examine the participants' demographic data, the types and level of participants' anxiety in learning English, and the types and level of participants' listening abilities. Next, Independent-Samples T-test was used to determine whether there is a significant relationship existed between participants' gender and the types and level of foreign language anxiety. To examine the relationship between English language anxiety and the participants' levels of English proficiency, the participants' English grades were divided into two groups: the high proficient learners (22 students) whose grades were A, B+, B; and the low proficient learners (18 students) whose grades were C+, C, D+, D. Then Independent-Samples T-test was used to explore the relationship. Finally, Pearson Product-Moment Coefficient was used to investigate the relationship between participants' English language anxiety and their listening abilities whether they were correlated.

Results

1) What types and level of English language anxiety do the undergraduates at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology experience?

Descriptive statistics was employed to investigate the level of English language anxiety of the undergraduates who enrolled in the elective English course: ENL-411 English through Multimedia at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (TNI), Thailand. Table 1 illustrates the mean of the inclusive English language anxiety categorized into four categories. The highest level of anxiety that the participants experienced while they were studying English was fear of negative evaluation ($M = 3.19$), followed by communication anxiety ($M = 3.17$), English classroom anxiety ($M = 3.09$), and finally test anxiety ($M = 3.03$). As a result, the level of English language anxiety that the participants encountered was medium ($M = 3.12$)

Table 1: Descriptive Statistic Results on the Level of English Language Anxiety of 40 Undergraduates at TNI (N = 40)

Rank Order	Four Categories of Language Anxiety	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Level of English Language Anxiety
1	Fear of Negative Evaluation	3.19	.87	Medium
2	Communication Anxiety	3.17	.62	Medium
3	English Classroom Anxiety	3.09	.58	Medium
4	Test Anxiety	3.03	.64	Medium
Total of English Anxiety on Average		3.12	.57	Medium

2) Do learners' gender and their levels of English proficiency affect their anxiety in English learning?

Descriptive Statistics was used to examine the level of English language anxiety regarding the gender difference and the levels of English proficiency of the participants. As shown in Table 2, the mean of the inclusive English language anxiety between male and female students revealed that females had higher English language anxiety than males (Females: $M = 3.27$; Males: $M = 3.02$), which was considered as medium level of English language anxiety. Female students had high level of English language anxiety in fear of negative evaluation ($M = 3.63$) while male students had medium level ($M = 2.90$). Then Independent-Sample T-test was used to analyze the relationship between participants' gender and their level of English language anxiety. The results of the t-test analysis indicated that there were no significant differences between gender and four categories of language anxiety; for example, communication anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and English classroom anxiety at .05 significant level. However, there was a significant difference between gender and fear of negative evaluation at .05 significant level ($p = .008$), which female students had higher fear of negative evaluation than males did (Females: $M = 3.63$; Males: $M = 2.90$).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistic and the Relationship between the Level of English Language Anxiety and Students' Gender Results (N = 40)

	Gender	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Types of Language Anxiety					
Communication Anxiety	Male	3.16	.40	-.180	.839
	Female	3.20	.86		
Fear of Negative Evaluation	Male	2.90	.74	-2.804	.008*
	Female	3.63	.88		
Test Anxiety	Male	3.00	.61	-.355	.725
	Female	3.07	.70		
English Classroom Anxiety	Male	3.04	.52	-.677	.502
	Female	3.17	.67		
Total of English Anxiety on Average	Male	3.02	.45	-1.220	.192
	Female	3.27	.70		

**p* < .05

In addition, the mean of the inclusive English language anxiety between the high English proficient learners and the low English proficient learners were presented in Table 3. The high English proficient learners had higher language anxiety than the low proficient ones (High Learners, *M* = 3.14; Low Learners, *M* 3.09), which their level of English language anxiety was medium level. Nevertheless, the low proficient English learners had higher English classroom anxiety than the high proficient learners (High Learners, *M* = 3.08; Low Learners, *M* 3.10). Then Independent-Sample T-test was used to analyze the relationship between participants' level of English language anxiety and their English proficiency. The results of the t-test analysis indicated that there were no significant differences between participants' level of English language anxiety and their English proficiency at .05 significant level (*p* = .774).

Table 3: Descriptive Statistic and the Relationship between the Level of English Language Anxiety and the Levels of Students' English Proficiency Results (N = 40)

Types of Language Anxiety	Level of English Proficiency	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Communication Anxiety	High Learners	3.22	.55	.980	.587
	Low Learners	3.11	.70		
Fear of Negative Evaluation	High Learners	3.23	.79	.290	.766
	Low Learners	3.14	.97		
Test Anxiety	High Learners	3.04	.70	.523	.870
	Low Learners	3.01	.58		
English Classroom Anxiety	High Learners	3.08	.56	.410	.940
	Low Learners	3.10	.62		
Total of English Anxiety on Average	High Learners	3.14	.55	.765	.774
	Low Learners	3.09	.60		

**p < .05*

3) Is there any relationship between learners' listening abilities and English language anxiety?

To examine the relationship between learners' listening abilities and English language anxiety, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (*r*) was used in this study because it was considered as the most common correlation technique (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). The results indicated that there was no significant relationship between learners' listening abilities and English language anxiety. Their relationship were low at $r = .259$, $p < .01$. However, there was a significant relationship between learners' listening abilities and their level of English proficiency ($r = -.424^{**}$, $p < .01$) as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Summary of Intercorrelations between Learners' Listening Abilities, English Language Anxiety, and Learners' Level of English Proficiency (N = 40)

	English Language Anxiety	Learners' Level of English Proficiency
Listening Strategies	.259	-.424**
		.006

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level ($p < .01$)

Discussion

1) What types and level of English language anxiety do the undergraduates at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology experience?

The results from the data analysis revealed that the level of English language anxiety of the undergraduates who enrolled in the elective English course: ENL-411 English through Multimedia at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (TNI) was medium level ($M = 3.12$). Horwitz (2008) indicated that “students with averages around 3 should be considered slightly anxious, while students with averages below 3 are probably not very anxious. Students who get average 4 and above, are probably fairly anxious”. Thus, Thai students in this study had some anxiety when they were learning English. The findings pointed out that the highest level of anxiety that they experienced was fear of negative evaluation ($M = 3.19$), which is consistent with Ohata’s study (2005). Ohata stated that the learners felt uneasy when teachers and friends corrected their mistakes. Moreover, fear of losing face in front of others was found to be a common anxious feeling perceived by language learners. The students usually express their anxiety in evaluative situations in which their knowledge and performance of English are monitored by people around them. Furthermore, although many learners feel that some error correction is necessary (Koch & Terrell, 1991; Horwitz, 1988), the manner of error correction is often cited as a provoking anxiety. It is found that students are more concerned about how many and when their mistakes are corrected rather than whether error correction should be administered in class.

2) Do learners' gender and their levels of English proficiency affect their anxiety in English learning?

The results indicated that female students had more anxiety in learning English than male students did (Females: $M = 3.27$; Males: $M = 3.02$). The findings are different from previous studies in that male learners experienced higher foreign language anxiety than female learners (Campbell, 1999; Kitano, 2001; Cui, 2011; Wang, 2014). The highest anxiety item that females in this study experienced was “I don’t understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.” ($M = 3.93$). This caused by self-perception or self-belief in language learning. Females also reported that “I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.” ($M = 3.75$), and “In language class, I can get so nervous when I forget things I know.” ($M = 3.75$) Oxford (1993) explains that females tend to be more

active strategy users, more successful language learners, more adaptive learners, and have more positive attitudes towards studying foreign languages than their male counterparts (Oxford, Nyikos and Ehrman, 1988). Moreover, the results indicated that there were no significant differences between learners' level of English language anxiety and their English proficiency. This is consistent with numerous studies in Chinese contexts (Wang, 2003; Lei 2004; Tang, 2005) which showed that there was no relationship between foreign language anxiety and learner's achievement. However, the result showed that there was a significant difference between gender and fear of negative evaluation which female students had higher fear of negative evaluation than males did. Maubach and Morgan (2001) explained that male students tended to have more self-confidence and risky-taking ability when engaging in communicating a foreign language than females did.

3) Is there any relationship between learners' listening abilities and English language anxiety?

Although, the results indicated that there was no significant relationship between learners' listening abilities and English language anxiety, listening abilities had some effects on learners' proficiency in English. Ellis (1994) mentions that the strategies that learners selected to use in each situation can reflect their general stage of second language learning. The successful language learners are the strategic person who can use strategies more greatly and appropriately to the learning tasks. For this reason, Thai learners in this study are strategic listeners who are aware of using listening strategies and can use listening strategies suiting each situation effectively ($M = 3.72$). Furthermore, the listening strategies that the learners employed the most were compensation strategies ($M = 3.97$). These strategies can help language learners/listeners overcome their knowledge limitations when they do not hear something clearly or they cannot catch all the words. They can make use of some clues to help them guess the meaning of certain words or pieces of information properly (Oxford, 1990). Based on the open-ended question result, Thai learners responded to the question "*When do you feel most anxious when studying this subject?*" Most of them agreed that they felt most anxious when listening to the authentic materials such as news reports, interviews, and selected movie scenes. They expressed that they could not understand the main ideas of the listening materials if the people spoke with fast speed and had different English accents and pronunciation. Hashemi and Abbasi (2013) also purposed that language learning anxiety may be occurred if the learners lack of sufficient linguistic knowledge in the target language. Therefore, it can be concluded that Thai learners are strategic listeners who employ the strategies to help them understand meaningful sounds, sentences, and situations even though they are not proficient language learners.

Recommendations for Further Research

Anxiety is an important factor that prevents foreign language learners from successful performance in the target language. It is imperative for language teachers to examine the causes of foreign language anxiety and reduce the undesired effects in foreign language teaching to create a low anxiety classroom for the learners (Young, 1991). Thus, further research should be conducted on efficient classroom environment, learning methodologies, learning activities, and evaluation procedure which reduce anxiety in language classes especially in adults EFL learners.

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