

Hybrid Learning: A Qualitative Study Of Learners' Anxiety In Language Classrooms

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigates sources of foreign language anxiety among undergraduate students in hybrid learning classrooms, with the aim of identifying factors that may cause or reduce anxiety and understanding its impact on learning English as a foreign language. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants from a Thai university where English is a compulsory subject. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, which was analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings suggest that psycholinguistic and socio-cultural factors in language learning and communication can induce English language anxiety among EFL students in the classroom. The study highlights the need for English language teachers to identify and understand these anxiety-provoking factors to create an anxiety-free learning environment that supports students' English development.

Keywords: English language, foreign language classroom anxiety, hybrid learning, undergraduate students

1. Introduction

Prior research has extensively examined the phenomenon of Language Anxiety in relation to a range of topics relevant to the present study. Researchers have utilized the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scales (FLCAS) to investigate the connection between general and situation-specific anxiety [1], [2]. The findings of these studies suggest that foreign language classroom anxiety differs between reading and non-reading classrooms. Additionally, a study conducted by a researcher examining Chinese students learning English as a second language revealed that they exhibited anxiety, poor grades, and public speaking apprehension when communicating in English [3]. Another investigation by [2] also discovered an obstructive relationship between the FLCAS and grade level in second language classrooms such as those teaching French and Spanish. Similarly, [4] found a mildly unfavorable correlation between

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and course grades among college students studying Japanese. Similarly, [5] found that Test Anxiety negatively impacted students' grades in several foreign language programs, including German, Spanish, and French. This is consistent with [6], who examined the possibility of students' avoidance of various English constructs and found that the use of passive structures reduced anxiety among native Arabic speakers.

The shift towards online learning has impacted teaching and learning in all subjects, including English language classes. Research suggests that English language digital resources are becoming increasingly important for non-native speakers of English [7]. Additionally, the role of the teacher in online learning has been identified as crucial for effective language learning in a technological environment [8]. The importance of the teacher's role in hybrid teaching and learning pedagogy,

which combines face-to-face and online learning, has been similarly emphasized [9]. This approach integrates technological advances and innovation in online learning with the interaction and participation of traditional learning models [10].

The hybrid learning method combines face-to-face instructional methods with online learning processes. This approach has gained popularity as it offers a potential solution for the current educational landscape [9]. By using online platforms in conjunction with traditional classroom settings, the hybrid learning method offers the benefits of both modes of instruction, including increased flexibility and accessibility, while retaining the valuable interaction and engagement that takes place in face-to-face classrooms.

In terms of the anxiety arising from the classes that applied the mentioned pedagogy, there was a study showing that Chinese students with distinct competence levels who face anxiety utilized personal records or reflective journals, in-class observations, and one-on-one interviews [11]. The significant number of students from different levels all experience anxiety when they must join conversational activities in face-to-face class or online classes [1]. The study also demonstrated that kids who were more adept were less anxious. Surprisingly, when students were required to respond to the teacher, they experienced the highest anxiety. Meanwhile, when they're working in pairs, they're the least nervous. Students have been less concerned about utilizing English in verbal communication as they gain more exposure to oral English online [1]. In Thailand, there has been a wide range of studies on Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scales (FLCAS). Most research about anxiety has focused on establishing a link between two learner characteristics. For example, Khamkhien [2] has investigated how English classroom anxiety affects first-year students' English achievement. A Thai version of the FLCAS was used to conduct the survey. Regardless of the areas of student's study, the data show that the FLCAS poorly affects their performance in a mandatory English foundation course. Furthermore,

the Believe about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) and an English language achievement test were used by Srikam et al. [3] to investigate whether beliefs, anxiety and achievement in the English learning classroom share common effects among school students. The study resulted in showing a relationship between language learning attitudes, Language Anxiety, and language learning achievement.

In addition, FLCAS may affect differently when the learning process and advantage and harmful achievement are considered. Some research conveys that FLCA has a positive impact on language learning. Liu [4] revealed their study findings that students who were less exposed to FLCA can get a higher score than those who were more exposed to it. Some research also asserted that FLCA had an impact on language learning positively. Horwitz [5] pointed out that anxiety can both boost people's performance and divert people's focus away from the task, resulting in poor performance. Brown's (2008) [6] study also investigated that student who learn the English language and experience with FLCA get an IELTS 6 competency level as a result. Many studies have discovered links between language speaking anxiety and L2 proficiency levels. For example, Li [11] discovered that as language level increased, the amount of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety decreased. In addition, it has been claimed that anxiety benefits language learners in some respects, such as keeping them attentive. Therefore, a high level of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety cannot only cause negative effects but can also cause positive effects [11]. From the studies mentioned above, there is no obvious agreement on which states, circumstances, or events have the effects where FLCA both promote and inhibit effects on learning [7] especially in the context of Thai EFL learners' FLCA in hybrid language learning contexts. To explore the insight of how such context the FLCA of the Thai EFL learners to explore the effects of the context of the FLCA on Thai EFL learners, this qualitative research design was employed.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Participants

The study involved forty undergraduate students who were enrolled in a compulsory English course at a university in Thailand. The participants consisted of 17 male and 23 female students, all of whom were studying in two different majors. They had been studying English as a compulsory subject since their primary and high school levels as required by the Thai education system. All participants had passed a minimum English requirement admission examination to gain admission to the university.

2.2. Student semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven highly anxious graduate students who were selected randomly from the participants. The interviews aimed to explore the causes of English language classroom anxiety that the participants experienced, and to collect data that was not directly observable. The interview questions were adapted from a previous study by [16]. The interview questions were designed to elicit responses on the participants' English language anxiety. The interviews were conducted in Thai, the participants' mother tongue, to facilitate communication and to promote richness of response in a less threatening environment. The interview questions were reworded when the interviewees did not understand the questions exactly. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a method of discourse extraction that identifies patterns in the data and connects them

to meaningful groups and themes that capture the subject being investigated [17]. The interviews lasted between 8-15 minutes.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study indicated that there were 19 potential sources of English language classroom anxiety among the undergraduate participants. Table 1 summarises the 19 codes generated by the researchers based on the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews. The identified sources of anxiety ranged from fear of negative evaluation to difficulties with English language proficiency. The most frequently mentioned sources of anxiety were fear of negative evaluation, difficulty in understanding the teacher's explanation, and fear of making grammatical errors in English.

The results of the study provide useful insights into the potential sources of English language anxiety among undergraduate students in a Thai university. The findings can inform the development of effective interventions to help alleviate anxiety and promote a more positive learning experience in the classroom. By addressing the identified sources of anxiety, educators can help create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment that fosters confidence and motivation in English language learning. It is worth noting that the findings are limited to the specific context of the study and may not be generalisable to other contexts. Further research is needed to explore the sources of English language anxiety among students in different educational settings and cultural contexts. Overall, the study provides valuable

TABLE 1: Outline of Coding Scheme

| Code Labels | Descriptions | Total Times Referred |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Inadequate grammatical knowledge | Errors frequently appearing in their sentence construction when they speak and write in English. | 6 |
| 2. Fear of being the focus of attention | Feeling anxious or uncomfortable in situations where one is likely to be the centre of attention — e.g., performing or speaking publicly. | 6 |

| Code Labels | Descriptions | Total Times Referred |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 3. Limited vocabulary knowledge | Overuse of lower-level vocabulary and failure to acquire more advanced-level vocabulary, as well as limited awareness of collocational usage. | 5 |
| 4. Fear of making mistake | Feeling embarrassed, anxious and humiliated when making mistakes in front of friends and teachers. | 5 |
| 5. Low English proficiency | Not fluent in the English language, often because it is not their native language. | 5 |
| 6. Inability to express oneself | Inability to use English to adequately express mature thoughts and ideas. | 4 |
| 7. Fear of negative evaluation | Apprehension about others' evaluations, distress over negative evaluations by others, and the expectation that others would evaluate one negatively. | 3 |
| 8. Attitude to EFL Learning | A feeling or opinion that influences one to learn or not to learn English language in the required manner. | 3 |
| 9. Lack of confidence | Spending more time thinking and worrying about what other people are doing than focusing on self-competence and potential. | 3 |
| 10. Poor/bad pronunciation | Utterances that cannot be comprehensible to listeners | 3 |
| 11. Fear of being laughed at | A disproportionate fear of being laughed at by others | 3 |
| 12. Perception on peer | A feeling that peers do better than oneself in a foreign language class | 2 |
| 13. Teacher-related | Related to instructional practices, teacher behaviours, instructor-learner interactions, and classroom procedures. | 2 |
| 14. Fear of failing test | A significant amount of stress related to preparing for and taking an examination | 2 |
| 15. Losing face | Apprehension about English production and understanding in a range of settings that might cause one to lose social prestige and reputation. | 2 |
| 16. Personality-related | Being reluctant to speak do not speak or speak seldom and, when speak, speak with difficulty | 1 |
| 17. Lack of practice | Not having enough opportunities to use the language outside the classroom | 1 |
| 18. Computer Literacy | Student's lack of computer literacy, technological proficiency | 1 |
| 19. Situational | The learning situation including formal and informal learning contexts | 1 |

contributions to the existing literature on English language anxiety and highlights the need for further research and intervention efforts to support language learners in their language learning journey.

The 19 codes generated from the data were examined, and some of them were found to fit together into broader themes. The coded data was reviewed to identify significant patterns of meaning, which resulted in the aggregation of the 19 codes into two themes: cognitive, and linguistic, and socio-cultural. The themes represent the aspects of causes attributed to English language classroom anxiety, according to the findings.

3.1. Anxiety provoking causes related to psycholinguistic aspect

This theme focuses on the psycholinguistic factors that contribute to English language anxiety among students. Psycholinguistics refers to the cognitive and psychological processes involved in acquiring and using language, including language production, perception, and acquisition. The findings revealed that various factors are associated with English language anxiety, such as inadequate grammatical knowledge, limited vocabulary knowledge, low English proficiency, an inability to express oneself, poor/bad pronunciation, failing tests, lack of practice, a negative attitude towards learning English as a foreign language, and computer literacy for online learning.

The participants reported that inadequate grammatical knowledge was the most significant and frequent cause of anxiety, as they were afraid of making grammatical errors in front of their peers and teachers. For instance, **S#5** stated,

"...When I speak English outside the classroom, I don't pay so much attention to grammar and feel more relaxed, but here in class it's different, I don't dare to do the same, because I'm afraid that everybody will hear I said something grammatically wrong..."

Similarly, **S#1** mentioned,

"...I feel anxious because I don't have enough vocabulary and grammar. I think if I knew more grammar or vocabulary or how to make a correct sentence, I wouldn't be nervous..."

Additionally, **S#3** stated, *"...I always have to think it over what I want to say before saying it and concentrate hard on making sentences grammatically correct or making use of words as accurately as possible..."*

Limited vocabulary knowledge was also reported as a contributing factor to English language anxiety, particularly when encountering unfamiliar words or technical terms. As **S#3** mentioned,

"...I don't like reading in front of class, especially when I encounter difficult or unknown words or technical terms..."

Low English proficiency was another major cause of classroom anxiety, as some participants felt nervous when they didn't understand questions or struggled to express themselves. For instance, **S#3** stated,

"...I enjoy speaking English in class and sharing the answers asked in the class but sometimes I feel nervous because I don't understand the question. I also think that it's due to my English that is not good enough. That's why I think speaking English in class is frightening..."

In addition, some students experienced anxiety due to an inability to express themselves, poor/bad pronunciation, failing tests, lack of practice, a negative attitude towards learning English as a foreign language, and computer literacy for online learning.

In summary, this theme sheds light on the psycholinguistic factors that contribute to English language anxiety among students. The identification of these factors can help educators develop strategies to address students' anxiety and improve their language learning experience.

3.2. Anxiety provoking causes related to socio-cultural aspect

Anxiety-provoking causes related to socio-cultural aspects of language learning can be attributed to the social environment, cultural background, personal experience, and perceptions of the English language. Sociolinguistics, which examines language in social and cultural contexts, sheds light on how individuals with diverse social identities communicate and how their speech changes in different situations. According to [4], sociolinguistics encompasses various issues, including how dialect features form personal styles of speech, how word pronunciation, word choice, and word patterns can cluster together, and why people from different communities or cultures may misunderstand each other due to language differences. Language anxiety primarily arises from the social and communicative aspects of language learning and is therefore classified as a social anxiety. Some participants suggest that social variables are more significant than cognitive and linguistic variables in causing language anxiety. [6], as referenced in [2].

Various factors can induce language anxiety, including fear of being the center of attention, fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, lack of confidence, fear of being laughed at, perception of peers, teacher-related factors, losing face, and situation-related reasons. Many participants reported feeling anxious or uneasy in situations where they are likely to be in the spotlight, such as when performing or speaking publicly, or in front of the class. The fear of being the center of attention was the highest cause reported by participants, as exemplified by the following excerpts:

(S#4) *"...I need a lot of time to practice my presentation. But you know, when I stood up in front of my classmates, I forgot everything HAHA. I was very nervous actually, I felt my heartbeat so fast, I was so shocked and embarrassed when many people stared at me. So, every time I prepare my notes, read from it and tried to finish the presentation..."*

(S#5) *"...I tend to say nothing even if I know I would be able to answer. I know I could speak about simple things or some topic, I've got the sentences in my mind, but when the teacher asked for a volunteer, I just can't. I don't want to be in spotlight or center of attention. Also, I'm sometimes not 100% sure about my answers..."*

(S#6) *"...What I'm most nervous about is being called on by the teacher and having to say something while everyone waiting to hear from me, this is what makes me feel uneasy. I don't want people to question that why I can't speak English even I have good education or good qualification..."*

In addition, fear of making mistakes was also a common cause of anxiety, as reported by some participants. For example:

Interviewer: *"...What are examples of situations that cause stress or anxiety for you?"*

(S#3): *"Personally, I think that it's impromptu speaking tests or interviews. The first reason is about my grammar, so I can't form correct sentences, the second reason is that I'm afraid of making mistakes or saying anything badly because I don't know what to say. It's like my brain is temporarily blank. I don't want my classmates or teachers to laugh at me or get very bad scores..."*

Similarly, S#6 reported, *"...I worry about not being able to say what I want correctly. The bad thing is that I always have to be very careful not to make mistakes..."*

These findings demonstrate the impact of socio-cultural factors on English language anxiety and highlight the need for educators to provide a supportive and inclusive learning environment to help alleviate anxiety and promote successful language acquisition.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this qualitative study offers valuable insights into the psycholinguistic and socio-cultural causes of English language anxiety among EFL students in the classroom environment. The findings illustrate the complex nature of language learning and communication and the role of anxiety in impeding progress. The study identified inadequate grammatical knowledge, limited vocabulary knowledge, low English proficiency, and poor/bad pronunciation as key psycholinguistic factors contributing to anxiety. The findings also highlight the impact of socio-cultural factors such as fear of being the center of attention, fear of making mistakes, and fear of being laughed at on students' anxiety levels.

The results of this study have important implications for English language teachers who need to understand the anxiety-provoking causes in order to create an anxiety-free learning environment that fosters students' progress. Specifically, teachers should consider addressing psycholinguistic factors such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and overall English proficiency, while also taking into account socio-cultural factors that may contribute to anxiety. By recognizing and addressing these issues, teachers can help students feel more comfortable and confident in the language classroom.

Moreover, the study has practical implications for online and distance language learning, which has become more prevalent since the pandemic. Given the use of new instructional technologies, it is important for teachers to survey and analyze students' digital literacy at the beginning of the course. This can help address potential anxiety-provoking factors and ensure that the online learning environment is conducive to students' language development. Teachers are also encouraged to meet learners' language learning needs through online learning, especially for those who are new to online or distance learning, and provide additional support to help reduce learners' perceived levels of foreign language anxiety.

From a policy perspective, the findings of this study suggest the need for educational institutions and policymakers to prioritize language learning and address the factors that contribute to language anxiety. This includes allocating resources to provide teacher training and professional development to help teachers create anxiety-free learning environments, as well as investing in research to better understand the nature of language anxiety and how it can be addressed. Additionally, policymakers should consider the use of technology and digital resources to support language learning, while also ensuring that language programs are accessible to all learners, regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances.

Overall, this study offers important qualitative insights into English language anxiety among EFL students in the classroom environment, which can inform teaching practices and help reduce anxiety levels among students. Further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of different strategies for addressing anxiety in the classroom and online learning environments, as well as the role of technology in supporting language learning and reducing anxiety.

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