

# Learners' Anxiety in EFL Context among Taiwanese Colleges

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**Abstract** Anxiety is an obstacle to Taiwanese college students in learning a foreign Language. The purpose of this study was to figure out the ways of preventing anxiety, help foreign language learners and English teachers to understand the reasons that cause learning anxiety and explore how anxiety influences foreign language learners' learning behavior and learning motivation. This qualitative research was conducted by seven interview questions and focused on Taiwanese college students' perspective and experiences in EFL context. The results indicated the anxiety impacts students' learning achievement. English is not an official language in Taiwan; therefore, students do not have opportunities to apply what they had learned at school. Students need more chances to practice their target language.

**Keywords:** anxiety, EFL, language learning

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## 1. Introduction

According to the survey (2013-2017) from Taiwan 104 Human Resource Center, it points out that 36% of jobs require English ability. Therefore, learning English as a foreign language has become an obligation in Taiwan. Students begin to learn English from in the third grade and continue studying and learning the language until college. Most of students learn English for preparing school entrance exams. Students also spend extra time attending intensive English program after school or English private institutes to improve their language skills. Some of the research indicated that anxiety occurs when someone or some objectives force second language learners to learn a language. Spielmann and Radnofsky [1] presented that learners' anxiety has become a central concern of second/foreign language acquisition research, which has focused almost exclusively on the negative effects of tension or stress that induce anxiety. Woodrow [2] stated that second language anxiety has a debilitating effect on the learning performance of learners of English as a second language. When second language learners feel hesitant, frustrated and confused, their emotions may influence their performance on their foreign language acquisition and may reduce their motivation in learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, it is important for language teachers to be aware of the learners' diverse aspects of foreign language learning.

The purpose of the study was to investigate learners' anxiety in learning English as a foreign language. The importance of learning English in Taiwan is valued and respected. Students who have fluent English abilities have

great opportunities to enter better colleges. Therefore, it is important to understand the levels of foreign language anxiety in order to help educators to improve their teaching and help students to reduce anxiety when learning a foreign language. This research investigated the reasons why many Taiwanese college students experience anxiety in a foreign language classroom. The relationship between language learning and anxiety influences students' learning attitudes and motivations. Hence, comparing findings to different students helps to determine the role of anxiety in foreign language learning. For instance students' background, prior English learning experience and time, and English proficiency levels influence the way they learn the target language.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Second Language Learning Anxiety

A person with anxiety worries and displays unconfident behavior. Zeidner [3] claimed that "emotionality" refers to physiological reactions, such as blushing or racing heart, and behavioral reactions, such as, stammering and fidgeting. When foreign language learners have trouble understanding a teacher's instruction, anxiety occurs. Anxiety may also take place when learners use inefficient study strategies and do not have enough opportunity to practice. For some students, evaluation may bring them anxiety because the fear of bad performances. Horwitz [4] considered anxiety as comprising three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. The relationship between second language learning and anxiety has produced a debilitating

effect on the performance of Taiwanese graduate students. Casado and Dereshiwsky [5] states that “anxiety can be measured in three different ways: by behavioral tests, where the actions of a subject is observed; by the subject’s self-report of internal feeling and reactions; or by physiological tests, where measures of heart rate, blood pressure, or palmar sweating are taken”. Studies have looked at anxiety influence learners’ learning process and achievement. Horwitz [4] considered anxiety as comprising three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Some research has also been done specifically on language learning anxiety. Spitalli [6] claimed that various anxiety studies suggest that anxiety is a multi-faced phenomenon, and its interrelationships with other relevant variables are complex. When students have anxiety in the language classroom, they may be afraid of answering questions, attending activities, and participating in the classroom. Refusing to participate in the classroom may cause second language learners even more anxiety and give them a negative outlook on their learning experiences. Dewalele [7] presented that the task of learning a new language is a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition because it threatens the learner’s self-concept and worldview.

Anxiety is intertwined with self-esteem. Kessler [8] claimed that “many have recognized the influence of affective factors in the language classroom, which may often involve the risk of embarrassment or humiliation. Speaking in a foreign language may result in the most heightened form of affect that a student can experience.” English is not an official language in Taiwan. Most students do not have the proper environment and enough opportunities to speak or practice English. In addition, English language learners often experience anxiety in the classroom because they worry about making mistakes and they are afraid of being laughed at by their classmates.

Anxiety can influence a learner’s learning behaviors and outcomes. MacIntyre [9] stated that anxiety has been identified as contributing to how willing a learner is to try to communicate; different environments can affect students’ anxiety and consequently, influence their speaking as well. Hence, students’ prior knowledge, learning experiences, feelings, personalities, and behaviors may influence language learning process. Spitalli [6] claimed that various anxiety studies suggest that anxiety is a multi-faced phenomenon, and its interrelationships with other relevant variables are complex.

## 2.2. Problems with Learning English as a Foreign Language in Taiwan

Learning English has become part of students’ life in Taiwan. Some colleges set up policies for students to pass certain levels of English examinations in order to graduate from their colleges. For many foreign language learners, studying English is being forced and pushed in Taiwan. Dornyei (2001) pointed out that “foreign language acquisition is complex and multidimensional: it is partly related to an individual’s personality, partly related to situational factors and partly linked to more general socioeducational and political factors”. An individual is

able to achieve the goal more with assistance than he or she can manage the tasks alone [10].

Foreign language learners do not have enough opportunities to practice English or an environment to apply what they have learned from school because in Taiwan, English is not an official language. Fan [11] stated that lack of confidence and lack of practice, two major obstacles, and influence students’ improvement. A lot of students spend most of their student life learning English. When they graduate from their schools, they no longer use or practice their English.

Most people speak Taiwanese and Chinese in Taiwan. This is a shame for the individual and for the whole school system that has invested money, time, and energy in the teaching of a skill that will ultimately not be used [12]. Therefore, anxiety occurs because students easily feel anxious to speak English in the classroom settings or outside the classroom. Horwitz [13] stated that foreign language acquisition is an enigma that merits to be cracked because the potential of anxiety to interfere with learning and performance is one of the most accepted phenomena in psychology and education.

## 3. Methodology

This qualitative research design used narrative approach. Participants are selected that meet the criteria (present college students in Taiwan) and respond to requests for participating in the research. Fifteen Taiwanese college students were selected from Current Taiwanese college students in the Department of Chinese and the Department of Law. Ten of the respondents were female and five of them were male. Seven participants live on campus in Taipei, and the others live off campus in a metropolitan area. Both of them were learning English through classroom exposure from Junior high school to college in Taiwan. They were now full time college students enrolled in the same university in the northern part of Taiwan. The qualitative research was collected by doing interview questions. Eight open-ended questions were included in the interviews. The data collection was carried out by interviews over the phone with participants as well as the face to face interviews. The researcher met with the participants once every two weeks.

The researcher analyzed qualitative data from observation, note taking, and conducting interviews. Analysis techniques were used such as coding the data, assigning labels to codes, comparing and contrasting data. The researcher used her own words to describe each participant’s answers and experiences by comparing and contrasting the differences and similarities of participants’ interview responses. Creswell [14] claimed that researchers need to protect their research participants. Therefore, data did not provide any identifiable information. Each participant has a pseudonym for protecting the privacy and confidentiality. After observing, recording, conducting interview, and analyzing the data, the researchers send the participants the results by emails in order to make sure the information is conducted accurately from each respondent.

## 4. Findings

There are total seven interview questions. The findings were divided into two parts: first, English learning experience and preference; second, learning behavior and anxiety. Each part presents several interview question responses and description from participants.

### Part 1 Learning Experience and Preference

Q1: How long have you been learning English as a foreign language? Do you enjoy learning English?

In regards to some of the respondents' experiences, some of them learn English as a foreign language for five to six years (A, C, E, L, and M, 11/5/10); others are six to nine years (B, D, F, G, H, I, J, N, O, and P, 11/5/10); one of them is over ten years (K, 11/5/10). As a result, the longer the participant learns English the more comfortable they feel when they acquire the knowledge. Respondents who have been studying English for over six and ten years enjoy learning English.

### Part 2 Learning Behavior and Anxiety

Q2: Is it stressful and nervous when learning a foreign language (English)? How?

Most of the participants responded that learning English in preparation for school entrance exams is stressful and nervous (A, B, C, E, F, I, L, M, N, O, and P, 11/05/10). Learning English only to get good grades and pass tests causes a lot of anxiety for respondents (A, B, C, E, L, M, N, O, and P, 11/05/10). Wrong motivations influence the outcomes of learning English (H, I, J, and K, 11/05/10).

Q3: Do you worry about making mistakes in a language class (English)? How?

In Regards to all participants' responses, most of the respondents worry about making mistakes in English class (A, B, C, E, F, I, L, M, N, O, and P, 11/05/10)

They were afraid that the other students will laugh at you when you speak the foreign language (English). Most of the participants feel nervous when speaking English in the classroom (A, E, L, D, F, G, H, I, J, K, N, and P, 11/06/10). Only a few of the students were not afraid of being laughed at when they make mistakes. They think making funny mistakes may ease the tense learning atmosphere (G, J, and K, 11/06/10). Everyone will remember the funny mistakes and will not let them happen again.

Most of the participants agree that making mistakes help them develop their English abilities (A, E, L, D, F, G, H, I, J, K, N, and P, 11/06/10)). Speaking English in the classroom is an efficient practice because they do not have other opportunities to apply their learning in their daily lives. Only a few of the respondents are afraid of being laughed by their classmates because of the pronunciation and grammar error (B, C, L, and M, 11/06/10).

Q4: Do you feel overwhelmed by the number of grammar rules that you have to learn in a foreign language? How?

A fair number of the Taiwanese college students were found out that they did not have enough opportunities to apply what they learned in their daily lives because English is not an official language in Taiwan. Therefore, they cannot use and practice their English frequently (B, D, H, and J, 11/06/2010). In addition, they easily forget and always get confused of what they have learned from their

language class. The lack of practicing makes them feel grammar rules were hard and confused.

Q5: Is it frightening to you when you do not understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language (English)? How?

In regards to this question, all of the respondents agree when they do not understand what the teacher is saying in English, it is frightening them (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, and P, 11/06/10). Some of them worry they may not learn at the same rate as their classmates. (A, E, L, D, F, G, H, I, N, and P, 11/06/10). Others are afraid of being asked pop questions (B, C, and J, 11/06/10).

Participants are also concerned that missing important points may cause them to fail the test (L, M, and O, 11/06/10). Some of the respondents addressed that "test and score" play into the fear which is embedded in their minds when learning English (A, B, D, and E, 11/06/10).

Q6: Do you get nervous when the language teacher asks you questions which you have not prepared in advance?

Most of the participants feel nervous when they are being asked questions that they have not prepared in advance (A, B, C, E, F, I, L, M, N, O, and P, 11/07/10). Some respondents addressed that if they are being asked questions about grammar, they will be extremely nervous (D, G, H, and J, 11/07/10). They both agree "grammar rules" are the most difficult aspects of learning English. Others stated that if they can preview the material in advance, they understand what the language teacher is going to teach and they will not feel anxious at all (A, B, C, E, F, I, K, L, M, N, O, and P, 11/07/10).

Q7: Do you feel comfortable around native speaker of the foreign language (English)? How?

Some of the participants think that being around with native speakers makes them feel less stressed because they can talk casually comparing to learning English in the classroom (A, B, I, L, M, N, O, and P, 11/07/10). Others expressed that getting along with native speakers make them feel uncomfortable because they do not know what to say and may bored the native speaker (C, D, E, F, and G, 11/07/10).

When talking to native speakers, some respondents are also afraid of comparing apples to oranges during the dialogue (G, H, and J, 11/07/10). A few participants pointed out that they enjoy talking to native speakers. When they have trouble communicating with each other, they can use "sign language" which they think is fun and entertaining (M, O, and K, 11/07/10).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study have suggested that language learning anxiety appears across both genders when some certain factors appear:

- Learners face pressure
- Learners meet unfamiliar material
- Assessments for learners
- Students are confused by different grammar rules.

Some participants stressed that English is not their official language which means they cannot use and practice their English frequently. Hence, in order to help student reduce their foreign language learning anxiety, educators should provide more opportunities for learners to apply what they learn in the class.

According to the responses from all participants, most of them presented that learning English causes them anxiety when they need to study English for tests or school entrance exams. Memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary in order to perform well on their assessments is the most difficult part of acquiring English. Since English is the second language for Taiwanese students, they need to spend a lot of time previewing and reviewing lessons.

In this study, Taiwanese students experienced high levels of language learning anxiety. The fear of failure and the lack of confidence make Taiwanese students participate less in the language classroom. Fan [11] stated that lack of confidence and lack of practice, two major obstacles, and influence students' improvement. They are afraid of being judged by their instructors because students do not want to give their teachers bad impressions.

The cultural background of Taiwanese college students may also influence learning and bring them anxiety. "Listen to teachers and obey teachers' instruction" are the common traditions in Taiwanese education. In addition, when Taiwanese students are confronted with learning difficulties, their fear of losing face may prevent them from seeking help. Learning a language requires more time and practices; anxiety occurs when learners cannot apply what they have learned in their daily lives and leads learners to have negative thoughts.

Taiwanese college students presented high levels of foreign language anxiety in this study. The results indicate that learning English is only for one purpose "test". Therefore, Taiwanese college students feel stressful and anxious in learning English because they do not learn it for interests. Also, English is not an official language in Taiwan; foreign language learners do not have enough opportunities to practice their target language. The results also showed that academic success plays a crucial role in language learning and language learners' anxiety levels may be influenced by different circumstances. Most of the learners are overwhelmed by various grammar rules and new vocabulary. The results also presented that learning English in the classroom is more stressful than getting along with native speakers. Language learners are afraid of not understanding teachers' instructions; they worry about failing their tests or getting bad scores. In general, these results suggest that students' belief of language learning difficulties and academic performances may be the primary causes of anxiety.

In addition, providing students more chances to practice their target language is needed. For instance, teacher-student interactive facilitation, student-teacher dialogue and instructional conversations are the most effective methods in the language approach. An understanding of the interactive approach can support students' learning because learning occurs during information exchanging. Knowledge is build up by collaborating with others.

According to Vygotsky's construct of the zone of proximal development which indicates that an individual is able to achieve the goal more with assistance than he or she can manage the tasks alone [10]. Therefore, a better individual learning outcome may occur through social communication, creativity, and collaboration. The most effective element from this research for language teachers is to help students reduce emotional frustration and diffidence because anxiety has a direct impact on a student's learning process and performance. Understanding the reasons behind language learning anxiety will help teachers to provide efficient teaching approaches and to also develop students' language comprehensive skills and learning strategies.

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