Language Anxiety vs. ELT Environment in Uttar Pradesh, India[1]

Dr. ASHA CHOUBEY
Associate Professor of English
Head, Department of Humanities
MJP Rohilkhand University
Bareilly, U.P., India

Abstract:

Language anxiety has been considered a major factor in ELT learning environment, however, there is not much attention paid to this in India despite the fact that Indian language learning environment has more than one factor causing anxiety. A survey was conducted across 20 Colleges of the state of Uttar Pradesh to find out the factors governing the English Language learning environment leading to anxiety and consequently hindering the process of language learning. This paper attempts to analyze these factors and their impact on the present ELT environment in the state. It is important to analyze the Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) Model as it may suggest ways to cope with the problem of anxiety in ELT environment across India.

Key words: ELT; Language anxiety; Psycholinguistics; ESL.

"Anxiety is a basic human emotion consisting of fear and uncertainty" (Sarason, 1988). Anxiety has its good and bad sides; on one hand it can help avoid dangerous events that can be life threatening, on the other it causes people to freeze as they tend to avoid non-dangerous situations. Learning is one such non-dangerous situation that makes learners anxious

---

13186

thereby posing an impediment in the process. Feelings of anxiety, apprehension and nervousness are commonly expressed by second/foreign language learners in learning to speak a second/foreign language. These feelings are considered to exert a potentially negative and detrimental effect on communication the target language. The use of modern communicative language teaching approaches in the language classrooms and the wide-spread use of English Language have increased the demand to learn good communication skills but existence of anxiety and apprehension in the learners may prevent them from achieving the desired goal. Consideration of learners' anxiety reactions in learning to speak another language by a language teacher is deemed highly important in order to assist them to achieve the intended performance goals in the target language. This study attempts to investigate the factors that language anxiety can possibly stem from, and proposes to recommend a variety of strategies to cope with it.

- **Origin of the research problem:**

In recent decades, research interest in second or foreign language learning has shifted from teacher-directed instruction to student-centered learning. Consequently, numerous studies have been conducted from the learners' perspective, and these perspectives have come to inform the field of language teaching pedagogy. We live in an educational world where orality is seen as a necessary, positive personal characteristic (Daly, 1991: 7). Worldwide expansion of English Language has increased this demand to acquire good communication skills in English. However, learners of English language often express a feeling of stress, nervousness or anxiety while learning English Language and claim to have, as mentioned above, a 'mental block' against learning English. The problem exists not only among ESL learners from beginning to intermediate levels but also advanced ESL learners who feel anxious while learning and speaking English in some situations, both within and out of the classroom settings. These learners wonder why they

cannot speak English well, because their compulsive efforts do not lead to their intended performance. Horwitz and Young (1991: xiv) – two well-known researchers in the area of 'language anxiety' were surprised "at the number of students who experience anxiety and distress in their language classes". Similarly, Campbell and Ortiz (1991: 159) found language anxiety among university students to be 'alarming' and estimated that up to one half of all language students experience debilitating levels of language anxiety.

Being a practitioner of English Language Teaching, the researcher herself has also observed this phenomenon among students from varied backgrounds as they sit in their mixed group class at the tertiary level. Thus, the researcher became interested to know why ESL learners feel anxious while learning and speaking English. Research has confirmed the existence of 'language anxiety' and its effect on second language learning (MacIntyre & Gardner 1991b), pointing to a reciprocity between anxiety and proficiency (MacIntyre *et al.* 1998:279), such that "even in optimum conditions, students can experience destructive forms of anxiety" (Reid 1999:297). Research (and the experience of teachers) suggests that language learning contexts are especially prone to anxiety arousal (Horwitz *et al.* 1986; MacIntyre 1995:90), with Campbell & Ortiz (1991:159) estimating that up to half of all language students experience debilitating levels of language anxiety, and Horwitz (Horwitz *et al.* 1986) finding that language anxiety can cause students to postpone language study indefinitely or to change streams/schools. Because of this, language anxiety has been the subject of a good deal of research, on the assumption that an understanding of its causes and investigation into how to reduce language anxiety will improve learner performance and increase learning satisfaction by easing tensions and reducing demands on cognitive processing space (Eysenck 1979).

- **Interdisciplinary Relevance:**

In a 2002 essay " The Anxiety of Learning - The Darker Side of Organizational Learning" Dr. Edgar Schein, identifies "learning anxiety" as stemming from the fear of failure, of looking stupid, of having to change. Anxiety is usually triggered by a situation that involves a decision or judgment; tests and exams are common precursors of anxiety in educational settings. In the times of Change Management and Crisis Management, a critical, focused study of the role of anxiety in learning shall have far reaching implications in Industry Management. Also since it impacts all learning, this study aims at being able to posit some really useful suggestions for all educators/teacher trainers/ ELT professionals/ psychologists/ Management trainers.

- **Review of Research and Development in the Subject International Status:**

The issue of language anxiety is being studied abroad with increasing frequency because of the influence it can have on second language learning, performance and ultimate achievement. Research into this area has a history spanning over three decades (Gardner *et al.*, 1976; Kleinmann, 1977; Stevick, 1980). According to Guiora (1983, p. 8), "the task of learning a new language is a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition", a view reinforced by Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope who contend that "probably no other field of study implicates self-concept and self-expression to the degree that language study does" (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p. 128). Research has focused on language anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors […] arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p. 128) and which "does not appear to bear a strong relation to other forms of anxiety" (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 30). Language anxiety is said to have a 'subtle' and 'pervasive' effect on cognitive processing (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), and to be associated with impaired

vocabulary learning, reduced word production, low grades in language courses or a combination of these factors. In response to their critics (notably Sparks & Ganschow, 1995, 2000), who do not accept a causal relationship between anxiety and learning, MacIntyre (1995a, 1995b, 1999) in the 90s and, more recently, Horwitz, (2000, 2001), strongly argue that anxiety is a multifaceted variable that can be both a *cause* and a *consequence* of poor language learning and remind us that "the potential of anxiety to interfere with learning and performance is one of the most accepted phenomena in psychology and education"(Horwitz, 2000, p. 256).

While the previous research has done much to statistically demonstrate the existence of second/foreign language anxiety, many researchers view that "even without empirical proof, the mere awareness of foreign language anxiety, even on an intuitive level, is testimony enough to its existence and worthy of fuller investigation" (Shamas, 2006: 14). Reviewing past research, Ohata (2005: 139) concludes that language anxiety cannot be defined in a linear manner but rather it can be better construed as a complex psychological phenomenon influenced by many different factors. Thus it seems to be more appropriate to deal with this issue from a variety of perspectives or approaches. For this reason, some research in this area has been descriptive in nature. Researchers such as Horwitz (1986), Price (1991), and Young (1990) have interviewed anxious students in order to have a better understanding of their experiences. Young (1992) conducted interviews with well-known language specialists such as Krashen, Omaggio Hadley, Terrell, and Rardin. Ohata (2005) considering teachers' role and the particular social context they create in the classroom interviewed seven experienced ESL/EFL teachers to investigate this phenomenon.

National Status:

A review of available literature indicates that related studies conducted in India are too limited. Though internationally much has been done by way of research in this field, much remains to be done in India. There are a number of International schools coming up in India and there is a steady growth of the populace speaking English as their mother tongue, literally so because their mothers know/speak more English than any other language. Nonetheless, there is even greater number of students who have a completely vernacular background and despite the status of English in India as second language a major chunk of the population learns English as a foreign language. In the majorly Hindi speaking state of Uttar Pradesh this is more true. Almost all Hindi-medium schools in the state have teachers of English imparting education completely in the medium of Hindi. Lessons are transacted in Hindi and most of the grammar books used carry a paraphrase of every single English sentence used. In such a scenario confidence building is unimaginable and anxiety is a major factor obstructing the path of even the potentially good language learners. Not much research is available in this area though. In his book *Learning and Teaching English in India* Ravi Shorey includes a chapter on "Learning Anxiety," and this is perhaps the only independent discussion of learning anxiety in the context of language in India.

Significance of the study:

Similar to the interview studies by the Western researchers, this study is a further step to investigate the factors that cause language anxiety for ESL learners from two different perspectives: 1) From the perspectives of ESL learners and 2) From that of the ESL teachers. Thus, this study intends to be more comprehensive in nature as it looks at the issue from a

variety of perspectives in an attempt to identify the sources of language anxiety; focusing on the actual sources of anxiety.

This research was conducted across the state of Uttar Pradesh, with learners from Hindi-medium background and belonging from vastly different backgrounds as they come together at the tertiary level. This allows the data to be compared to the body of literature on language anxiety. This study will be of considerable interest to language educators and students because of the potentially negative impact of foreign language anxiety, not only on the various domains of language performance, but also on students' attitudes and perceptions of language learning in general. This study is also significant with respect to its implication for foreign or second language pedagogy. The investigation of the anxiety-producing factors that arise while learning to communicate in the target language will hopefully broaden the insight into the issue of language anxiety and will help language teachers in making the classroom environment less stressful.

The study seeks to answer some basic research questions which help to build a better class room environment for conducive learning. The questions that the study addresses are:

1. What are the psycholinguistic factors that cause language anxiety for ESL learners in learning and speaking English Language?
2. What are the socio-cultural factors that cause language anxiety for ESL learners in learning and speaking English Language?
3. How is language anxiety manifested in the learners?
4. Does anxiety have a negative impact on learners' attitudes and perceptions of language learning?
5. How does anxiety affect language learning?
6. Which strategies can be used to successfully cope with language anxiety?

(i)　　Objectives :

The major purpose of the research is to find out why ESL learners feel anxious or embarrassed while learning English Language and what influence it casts on their communication in the target language. In other words, what are the factors or sources that make learning English more stressful in some situations than in others.

- It seeks to discover the phenomenon of language anxiety from both within and outside of the language classroom setting in a wider social context. This includes considering the factors that originate from the learner's own sense of self, from the language learning process, or from the situation or social environment he/she is a part of.
- The second most important aim of this study is to find out and suggest some strategies for language teachers in order to alleviate language anxiety in the learners.
- It will also inform the researcher of this study about the phenomenon, as a learner, as well as a practitioner of English Language Teaching.
- In addition, integrating the findings of this research on language anxiety -regarding its nature, sources, effects and treatment -with the existing literature is also an underlying consideration of the study.

(ii)　　Methodology :

Being an empirical research this study is based on interviews and surveys conducted across the state. The survey instrument I have used in this study is BALLI (Horwitz, 1987), The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz & Cope, 1986), besides conducting some qualitative semi-structured interviews with both the students and teachers to investigate the issue. These instruments have been modified to suit the requirements of the present study. Fifty six students and 23 teachers across 21 colleges participated.

(iii)   Findings

Psycho-linguistic factors:

1. Fear of negative evaluation

Language classroom is perceived as a testing forum, where students are constantly evaluated by teacher/peers. The moment they say something that breaks the language norms, they are criticized/looked down upon. Most of the students maintained they were comfortable using English outside of the strict testing enviorns of their language classroom, but the moment the language class began, they became tight lipped lest they might be laughed at for their mistakes.

2. Fear of misplaced expectations

Even during presentations in the class, students felt stressed because they would prepare the presentation and try to learn it by heart. Then, there is always the pressure that they might not be able to recall it correctly. One of the students admitted, " what will the girls think of me, if I make mistakes. Looks like I am a fool." What Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) mention as 'perfectionism', aggravates the anxiety amongst the students. They are afraid of making mistakes and that is what actually, ironically pushes them towards making mistakes. It's more of the expectation that the listener/s might have of the speaker/s that makes conditions even worse. Such anxious learners try to avoid participation in classroom activities. It's a vicious circle, one needs to perform in class to be able to learn but one stops doing that due to fear of making mistakes. This greatly damages the chances of learning.

3. Language teacher's role

Many students reported that they did not want to attend the language class because if they make a mistake, the teacher humiliates them in front of their peers. Some also confessed that they joined the language class with great enthusiasm to

learn the language, but they don't want to attend it anymore because the teacher is mercilessly unforgiving of their mistakes.

4. The fallacy of self-perception

While the heightened expectations of the teachers and the peers can greatly shake the comfort zone of the language learner, at times, learners self perception does more damage. Due to negative evaluation in the past, the language learner tends to make a perception of self as inferior to peers. This leads to increased levels of stress, which in turn makes learning even more difficult.

Linguistic factors

1. Pronunciation

Pronunciation happens to be the most dreaded area for foreign/ second language learners. Some English sounds may not be present in the native language sound system, thus making it an uphill task for learners to be able to listen to it properly, leave aside copying/reproducing it. Also, teachers' insistence on native-like pronunciation may further aggravate the problem.

2. Grammar

English grammar is by far the most complex grammar system and norms are not fixed as much as they are in Hindi grammar. In English grammar person has gender, while in Hindi grammar gender is denoted by verb inflection. The language learner has to constantly translate thoughts and expressions in English and at the same time they have to use/apply a different set of grammar rules. Thus, the anxious language learner faces much problem in becoming a good communicator.

3. Vocabulary

Learners find themselves lacking in vocabulary. "I do not have exact words to express my ideas," is a general complaint. Since

learners think in their own language and then translate the thought in the target language, many a time they fail to reproduce the right word while speaking even when they know it.

Socio-cultural factors

It is important to practice a language in order to achieve a good command. Hence it's important that the language learner be regularly exposed to an environment where the target language is spoken. In India, and especially in the Uttar Pradesh, it is almost an impossibility. Students learn in the class, but even an English classroom does not present an atmosphere where English speaking is the norm. The English teacher in a U.P. classroom is not necessarily an English speaking person and English is taught more by way of translation than actual practice. It is more of a subject, than a language. Most of the students, who took part in this survey admitted that when they learn in the class, they feel as if they know now, but when they actually come to a situation where they are required to reproduce, they fumble because of the long gap between the time they learn and the time when they get a situation where they can actually use it. At homes, in the markets, with their friends, everywhere they are expected to use Hindi only. In fact, all government correspondence in Uttar Pradesh is also supposed to be in Hindi. This creates a kind of social handicap for the learner making matters really worse.

Cultural differences between that of the learner's and the target language also poses great challenge, thus increasing the level of anxiety experienced by the learner. The learner doesn't know what expressions to use so that they might not offend the other culture. Many expressions are considered acceptable in some cultures while they might sound offensive in some other cultures. A native English speaker, when he leaves he says, " I take your leave"; while a Hindi speaker says, "I leave (Main chalta hun)." An example from Bangla might

explain this in a better way. A Bengali, while taking your leave will say, " I am coming." It is considered rude to say "I leave." These cultural differences can be learnt only when a learner has been exposed to the target culture for a long time, which is not possible for an average learner of English in U.P.

An interesting aspect to note here, would be the learner's self-identity. A good number of learners suffer face loss because when they make mistakes they seem to lose self-esteem. Peirce (1995:18) assumes that our self-identity is rooted in our first language, hence fear of losing this identity leads to language anxiety in the context of second language learning.

Gender
In a state like Uttar Pradesh, gender is certainly an important concern in all spheres of life. Co-education is not the norm in Hindi-medium schools. Consequently, boys and girls are not much comfortable with each other. At the tertiary level, when they come together to study in the same class, it becomes a little problematic inasmuch as their comfort in speaking a foreign language is concerned. Learners are extremely conscious of the presence of the other sex in the class, and they are hesitant to use the foreign language lest their mistakes be noticed.

(iv)   Strategies suggested:
On the basis of my discussions with learners as well as teachers of language, I could understand that alleviation of learner's anxiety is not a difficult task. Both the teacher as well as the learner have to be ready to make the language class a better and more conducive place for learning. I enumerate the strategies suggested by some of our subjects:
  1. Almost all the subjects of this survey agreed that language classroom needs to be a friendly place where strictness should not find any place. In Uttar Pradesh classrooms are looked upon more as punishment rooms, where one slight slip and they get punishment in terms

of facing humiliation before the class. An atmosphere of equality where the teacher appears more human is very important for anxiety to go.

2. Role-play can help alleviate language anxiety, because it affords an artificial situation and an artificial identity. The fear of losing self-identity is reduced to a great extent.

3. Teachers must emphasize the importance of making mistakes so that students are not scared of mistakes. Teachers can tell them that when you make mistakes, you move towards learning. Thus, the learners morale will not be weakened by their mistakes.

4. Formative assessment method should be adopted, where teachers should not intervene when the learner makes mistake. At a later stage though, he can correct the mistakes without taking any names. This encourages the learners and their fluency does not suffer.

5. For learner's to take part in classroom activities, it is important that they develop a sense of belonging for the class. They must feel that the class is for them and they will not be judged constantly. Negative evaluation leads to alienation, but a positive environment breeds a sense of belonging.

(v)   Recommendations

These recommendations are not exhaustive, but they would certainly go a long way in helping the thwarting situation:

a. A clear awareness of Anxiety in a language classroom as different from any other kind of anxiety.

b. An honest discussion on anxiety in the classroom so that learners understand that they are not the only ones who feel anxiety in such situations.

c. A learner friendly class where teacher let's the students think that they control the class.

d. Adoption of a communicative approach, where learners get ample opportunity as well as material (situations and lexis) to use the language.

e. Language class should be treated as a class different from those where subjects are taught. Language should not be treated as a subject, but as a language only.

WORKS CITED:

Campbell, C., & Ortiz, J. (1991) 'Helping students overcome foreign language anxiety: a foreign language anxiety workshop', in Horwitz, E. K., & Young, D.J. (Eds.) *Language Anxiety: From Theory and Research to Classroom Implications.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, pp. 159. Print.

Daly, J. (1991) 'Understanding Communication Apprehension: An Introduction for Language Educators', in Horwitz, E. K., & Young, D.J. (eds.) *Language Anxiety: From Theory and Research to Classroom Implications.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. P.7. Print.

Eysenck, M. W. (1979). Anxiety, learning and memory: A reconceptualization. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *13*(4), 363-385. Print.

Gregersen, T., & Horwitz, E. K. (2002) 'Language Learning and Perfectionism: Anxious and Non-anxious Language Learners' Reactions to Their Own Oral Performance', *The Modern Language Journal,* Vol. 86 (4)**,** pp. 562-570. Print.

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. A. (1986) 'Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety', *The Modern Language Journal,* Vol. 70 (2), pp. 125-132

Horwitz, E.K., & Young, D. J. (1991) *Language Anxiety: From Theory and Research to Classroom Implications.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. Print.

MacIntyre, P. D. (1995) 'How Does Anxiety Affect Foreign Language Learning: A Reply to Sparks and Ganschow', *The Modern Language Journal,* Vol. 79(1), pp. 90-99. Print.

MacIntyre, P. D., & Baker, S, C. (2003) 'The Role of Gender and Immersion in Communication and Second Language Orientations', *Language Learning,* Vol. 53. (1), pp. 65-96. Print.

MacIntyre, P., & Gardner, R. C. (1991) 'Investigating Language Class Anxiety Using the Focused Essay Technique', *The Modern Language Journal,* Vol. 75 (3), pp. 296- 304. Print.

MacIntyre, P. D., Dornyei, Z., Clement, R., & Noels, K. A. (1998) 'Conceptualizing Willingness to Communicate in a L2: A Situational Model of L2 Confidence and Affiliation', *Modern Language Journal,* Vol. 82 (4), p. 279. Print.

MacIntyre, P., & Gardner, R. C. (1994) 'The Stable Effects of Language Anxiety on Cognitive Processing in the Second Language', *Language Learning,* Vol. 44 (2), 283-305. Print.

MacIntyre, P. D. (1995) 'How Does Anxiety Affect Foreign Language Learning: A Reply to Sparks and Ganschow', *The Modern Language Journal,* Vol. 79(1), pp. 90-99

MacIntyre, P. D., & Baker, S, C. (2003) 'The Role of Gender and Immersion in Communication and Second Language Orientations', *Language Learning,* Vol. 53. (1), pp. 65-96. Print.

Ohata, K. (2005) 'Language Anxiety From the Teacher's Perspective: Interviews with Seven Experienced ESL/EFL Teachers', *Journal of Language and Learning,* Vol. 3 (1), pp. 133-155. Print.

Peirce, B. N. (1995) 'Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning', *TESOL Quarterly,* Vol. 29(1), pp. 9-31. Print.

Price, M. L. (1991) 'The Subjective Experience of Foreign Language Anxiety: Interviews with High Anxious

Students', in Horwitz, E.K., & Young, D. J. (eds.) *Language Anxiety: From Theory and Research to Classroom Implications.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. Print.

Reid, J. (1999). Affect in the classroom: Problems , politics and pragmatics. In J. Arnold (Ed.) Affect in language learning. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 297-306. Print.

Shamas, A. (2006) *The Use of Computerized Pronunciation Practice in the Reduction of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety*. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, The Florida State University. Print.

Sparks, R. L. & Ganschow, L. 1995. A Strong Inference to casual factors in foreign language learning: A response to MacIntyre. Modern Language Journal 79, 235-244. Print.

Young, D, J. (1990) 'An Investigation of Students' Perspectives on Anxiety and Speaking', *Foreign Language Annals.* Vol. 23, pp. 539-553. Print.

Young, D. J. (1992) 'Language anxiety from the foreign language specialists' perspective: Interview with Krashen, Omaggio Hadley, Terrell, and Rardin', *Foreign Language Annals,* Vol. 25, pp. 157-172. Print.