



## Fear as a Hindering Factor in the Second Language Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

*The attitude towards language learning is a critical factor in the ESL context. Attitude is characterized by a large proportion of emotional involvement such as feelings, and self-relationships in the community. The fear of language learning has a negative impact on a learner's future learning encounters and affects future learning possibilities. The objective of this research paper is to focus on the impact of fear or anxiety in language learning, specifically related to speaking, reading and writing. Quantitative and qualitative methodology have been employed. Forty-six students from the Faculty of Science, and the teachers who were assigned to teach English for science students were selected for this study. Data was collected from classroom observation, a questionnaire and interviews. The study reveals that the fear of speech frequently occurred because of the uncondusive environment and fear of negative evaluation. Fear of reading and writing are also to be observed due to the lack of technical skills among students and lack of practice. Fear is a vicious cyclic process. So the study recommends that teachers explore and provide suggestions on how to alleviate the fear that is embedded among students related to language skills.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Attitude towards language learning is a critical factor in the ESL context. According to Brown (2001 as cited in Inal, Evin & Saracaloglu, 2005), attitude is characterized by a large proportion of emotional involvement such as feelings, and self-relationships in the community. Attitude impacts on the success or failure of language learning. Positive attitudes towards learning will induce students to learn more; on the other hand, a negative attitude will affect their life-long achievement towards language learning. As Tella (2010) investigates, a negative attitude towards English is the most affective and psychological factor that results in the students' poor performance in English. In other words, achievement in a target language relies not only on learners' ability to learn a language but also on their attitudes towards language learning.

Among the factors affecting the attitudes of students, fear is found to be the most important factor which functions as a hindering factor for learning English among students. Fear and fear related factors of language are a cyclic process which hinders further practice of the target language. The fear-to- practice process becomes a cycle of fear for the learner and leads to low self-esteem and less achievement towards learning. It is the responsibility of the teacher to find out the factors leading to fear in order to design an effective teaching and learning process.

Fear of language learning is caused by many factors. There have been several studies to explore the causes of anxiety in language learning. Cagatay (2015) examines students' foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) with 147 Turkish students at the English preparatory program of a state university. The findings reveal gender differences affect the anxiety level in speaking. Female students are more anxious than male students. It is found that students are more

comfortable when communicating with a native speaker compared to their peer group. Another study was conducted by Ab Latif (2015) exploring the factors which influence the level of language anxiety. His research is based on the variables of gender and years of learning English. 132 respondents responded to a survey adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986). The results obtained indicated that there is a correlation between language anxiety and years of learning English, while there is no significant relationship between language learning and age.

The study by Hashemi (2011) investigates the factors that lead to language fear not only within the classroom but also from the social context. Both qualitative, semi-structured interview, and focus group discussion techniques were used among the Iranian language learners in this research. It was found that many factors such as classroom environment, learning styles and self-related cognitions influence in the language learning. From this research, it was revealed that students are afraid of losing their self-identity.

Harmer (2007) reveals that trait and state apprehension lead to fear in oral presentation. Trait apprehension is caused by the following factors: nervousness over their presentation, fear due to insufficient preparation or comparison with others or even fear they may forget their memorized text. The next type of apprehension is state apprehension. This type of anxiety occurs due to the unpleasant feelings of specific situations or events such as their own physical appearance, the environment or even the evaluation process. They may also fear the size and composition of the audience, or the impression the evaluators have on them. They are afraid the evaluators' negative comments and the negative threat of the previous evaluation process due to the previous marks.

According to Garcia et al. (2014), some learners could not concentrate, and they were found to be lazy when they have long passages. Some learners find difficulties in reading passages because of the vocabulary and complex sentences. Learners have different learning styles so many learners struggle to follow the text without aids. The study concludes that separate strategies have to be incorporated as reading comprehension activities in order to encourage students. In the case of writing skill, students perceived it as a difficult one. They may have got this perception due to prior experience. Their perception of difficulties may be different from learner to learner. Learners' fear of writing may stem from their perception. This is because learners' perception of writing

difficulty is influenced by the environment and also the cognitive abilities of the writer.

The concept of cycle in prophecy by a person stems from the "cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy" proposed by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). The beliefs of the individual influence his/her expectations of any learning situations. The positive beliefs may bring positive reinforcement in the future beliefs towards learning. Negative beliefs eventually lead into a vicious cycle of negativity. Self-fulfilling prophecy is a prediction that what a person sees/ feels as true will directly or indirectly become true eventually.

**Table 1.** Merging self-fulfilling prophesy with communication apprehension

Beliefs	→	Communication Apprehension
Expectation		Fear of test anxiety
Behaviors		Fear of negative evaluation
Results		Fear of second language class

A student starts his journey with fearful apprehension in oral communication. At this stage, a student is filled with self-doubt, shyness and hesitation.

This apprehension is heightened at the next stage where he/she is going to be assessed by the teacher. This anxiety leads to more fear-related behavior. It is at this stage where a speaker finds himself/herself in a position with lack of words or struggling with cognitive or verbal planning. Finally, the results of this anxiety will lead to the fear in the second language classroom.

The objective of this research is to find out the fear related factors which hinder the development of language learning. This research is undertaken to find out the representation of fear among learners in

language learning skills such as speaking, reading and writing.

The study proposed to answer the following research questions.

1. Do learners have attitudinal problems towards learning English language?
2. What is the impact of fear in speaking skill in language learning?
3. What is the impact of fear in reading skill in language learning?
4. What is the impact of fear in writing skill in language learning?

**2. Materials and Methods**

The sample of the study are 46 second year students from the Faculty of Science, and their English language teachers. Qualitative

and quantitative methodology is undertaken. This method of the research is adopted through questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions. Questionnaire is used as the main data-gathering instrument. The other data-gathering tool is an interview. A semi-structured interview and open-ended questions are incorporated as data-gathering tools. The researcher raised questions relating to ideas, opinions, attitudes and experiences of students and their English language learning.

Concerning the distribution of the questionnaire, the consent was requested from the Head of English Department, students and teachers who participated in the study. They certify being aware of the purpose of the study, the different data collection techniques that would be used, the data processing, and the protection of their identity through the use of pseudonyms. This letter of consent granted permission to interview them as well as to use the data gathered from the interview and questionnaire for research purposes. Participants were informed that they could

withdraw at any time if they wished. Respondents were allowed to ask any questions related to the questionnaire.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Fear of speaking/speech

One of the language skills which is considered as harder is speaking/ oral production skills. Oral skills require much effort from the presenter more than other language abilities. The findings of this study reveal that both trait and state apprehension can influence students' ability to speak. The following table is the summary from the details of the questionnaire.

This table presents answers to the research question 'how far is there fear in oral production skills among students?' From analyzing the questionnaire, there were thirty-two students who struggled because of fear in speaking. There are some factors that contributed to fear in speaking.: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation.

**Table 2.** Communication apprehension

Student	Communication apprehension
S1	Shyness
S3	Uncontrolled interference of mother tongue
S8	Shyness of attention seeking
S10	Feel blank
S11	Confused
S14	Frozen
S18	Afraid that other students will laugh
S21	Fearing mother tongue may interfere in between.
S25	Feel that other students speak English better than I do
S26	Frightened by the environment or before the audience

**Table 3.** Fear of test anxiety

<b>Students</b>	<b>Test anxiety</b>
S2	Trembled when I know that I am going to be called in a class
S4	Afraid that I may forget my content in between
S9	Trembling
S12	Panic speaking without preparation in language class
S13	Sweating
S19	Even I am well-prepared for language test, I feel anxious about it
S23	Heart pounding
S24	Stammering
S27	Sweaty palm and leg
S30	Dazed and blank
S31	Wrought up
S32	Changing voice

**Table 4.** Fear of negative evaluation

<b>Students</b>	<b>Negative evaluation</b>
S5	Frighten when the teacher does not understand what he/she says
S6	Worrying about physical appearance
S7	Worry about the consequences of failing
S15	Self-conscious about speaking the second language in front of peers
S16	Confident
S17	Dazed
S20	Heart pounding
S22	Couldn't recall the beginning of speech
S28	Fear
S29	Trembling

From table 2, table 3 and table 4 effects of anxiety under three different situations are revealed. Different expressions such as 'trembling', 'blank', and 'dazed' show the physical anxiety.

In order to reduce the negative feelings from speaking, the following can be recommended. 80 % of the students claim that they are comfortable with their peers in speaking in class than with the teacher. So it is the responsibility of the teacher to create a comfort zone in the classroom. When collaborative work was encouraged, students would check with their peers and were more comfortable with peer support than with the teachers. In the process of producing output, the learners are in their inter language

continuum. It provides an opportunity for them to analyze the gaps and problems in their inter-language system and produce a more refined output. When students interact the implicit nature of learning becomes explicit. At the same time collective scaffolding supports students to fill their gaps as the learners pool their knowledge by talking about language.

Around 70 % of the students claim that they are not comfortable with their classroom environment. Their interview and discussion further support the percentage. The physical environment of the classroom sets the stage for the teacher-dominated lesson by dividing the room into 'teacher-space', and 'student space'. Class size is seen to be a major

constraint to implementing group activities. It is difficult to have many students in one group. In those instances, close monitoring of group activities is essential.

There is barely room to walk between rows of benches and speak to students. As there are a number of students in each group, non-participation of every student can prevent the effectivity of the activity. When group work is given, lower proficient students struggle to understand the exercises. There will be a dominance of higher proficient students. Lower proficient students would be even more inhibited to engage when their fellow students complete their task. The low proficient students just copy down what is presented by the higher proficient ones and remain silent. When group work is given, the teachers needed to endorse group activity and reduce uncertainty by circulating among the groups while working together. But the classroom atmosphere, unfortunately, prevents it. So even in group activities, the lower proficient students feel fear and neglect. The learning environment then influences the behavior of the learner in the learning environment.

According to Knight (1994 cited in Freeman 2001) learners who engaged in preparatory work in L1 do much better and L1 plays a vital role in obtaining knowledge needed to reach a higher level of L2 performance and thereby reduce stress. Larsen- Freeman (2000) & Butzkamm (2003) stress that the avoidance of L1 in L2 Learning is like rejecting a useful tool in language processing and psychological tool in reducing nervousness. Freeman (2001) says 'if they are beginners, they will rely on their L1 as a source of hypothesis about L2 works.' There, the use of L1 during the collaborative work should not be excluded. When the L1 is used at the beginning of the lesson, the students will feel more comfortable and motivated.

Peer teaching can free language learning from over-domination by the teacher. Students are more confident of themselves in front of the

teacher. Thus, they are brave enough to argue with their teacher; both students and teachers learn the language instead of learning about the language. Above all, in peer teaching the actual teacher acts as a participant. This not only will improve the atmosphere in class but will also give students a chance to practice English with someone who speaks it better than they do.

### 3.2 Fear of reading

According to 80% of students, they often fear about the length of texts. After looking at the length of texts and questions, students become anxious. From the discussion, simplified and authentic texts are recommended. Adaptation of text material for reading comprehension involves the simplification of lexis and syntax and the discourse structure. Simplifying lexis involves the substitution of 'simpler for more difficult words. Simplifying syntax involves the de-transformation of complex sentences into simple sentences. Collaboration with an academic from the subject of Science at the Faculty would have enabled the teacher to simplify the discourse. Reading texts should not have too many discourses. Collaboration with a subject specialist constitutes appropriate communication of scientific information at a simplified level.

Many students complain, "As the text is long, at the end of reading I have forgotten what is in the first paragraph. We are unable to grasp the gist of the paragraph. That is why we are anxious in the exam." Brown (2007) identifies comprehension as 'the process of receiving language;' listening or reading input.' Comprehension in the academic reading is the ability to take in relevant information; analyze it in its respective segments and come up with an understanding of the input in a cohesive and accurate manner (Carrie, 2011). Most students are unable to reproduce the information which they have read in the text to answer the questions. So it is a useful strategy to have students take notes in ways that are meaningful to them while they are

reading. The problem is that the ability to take information and make it one's own by processing it, restructuring it and then presenting it in a meaningful form. So, note-taking is an important strategy to be practiced doing a reading activity. It helps to reach the level of automaticity and critical analysis. English classes fail to provide training in the skills and sub-skills that are required for advanced work in university disciplines. Instead, the teachers should show advantages in catering for the specific skills-listening and note taking and reading and note taking.

70% of students claim that texts are monotonous. So, they lose their interest in reading texts. In their opinion, rather than choosing the most academic and long texts, students can be introduced to short passages which touch on different aspects such as science, media, medicine, engineering, sports and cinema. They are more authentic and attract the youngsters.

### 3.3 Fear of writing

Students struggle with the sentence patterns related to writing ability. The technique of drilling in conventional language teaching wisdom has a role to play. Certainly, there are occasions when it is necessary to fix a pattern in the student's mind by some forms of controlled repetition in order to distinguish two semantically related but syntactically distinct structures. Yet, it was found in general, however, that drilling can be of limited usefulness; in many cases the types of structures dictated by the framework of the course do not lend themselves to this form of practice. For example, take a drill to practice a common structure. Meaningful drills are a way to reduce the mistakes in writing.

Writing teachers need to be exposed to many different approaches of teaching. Rather than introducing them with the product approach, students can be introduced with the process approach. Students are afraid of the lack of

practice in the writing skill which is why they display avoidance behavior towards writing.

### 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

According to Rahmat (2019) the fear of learning is a vicious cycle because a reaction at one stage may lead to consequences at another stage. If no action is taken to overcome the fear, the learners will end up in unsuccessful language classes. Another important step is to take appropriate measures at proper time. So, it is the responsibility of teachers to help students in a way to overcome fear in the language classroom.

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