

LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND PEDAGOGICAL PREFERENCES: A STUDY OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

This study investigated the pedagogical preferences of pre-service teachers of different language anxiety levels. Participants were 113 pre-service teachers (29 males, 84 females) in the second semester of the Foundation Program for a B. Ed. (TESL) Program. Data on the extent of language anxiety was collected through administration of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Based on their total score in the language anxiety scale, pre-service teachers were categorized into three levels of language anxiety, namely low language anxiety (LLA), moderate language anxiety (MLA) and high language anxiety (HLA). Pre-service teachers were also required to respond to a 22-item questionnaire on their pedagogical preferences in English class. The findings showed that LLA pre-service teachers appeared to have greater preference for working individually at learning tasks, being involved in oral exercises, and taking part in role plays, drama, simulations and games compared to HLA pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers' reasons for liking or disliking specific pedagogical activities are also presented. Pedagogical implications of the findings and suggestions for further research are included in this article.

Keywords: language anxiety, pedagogical preferences, English, pre-service teachers

Abstrak

Kajian ini menyiasat pilihan pedagogi guru-guru praperkhidmatan pada tahap kebimbangan bahasa yang berlainan. Peserta kajian terdiri daripada 113 guru praperkhidmatan (29 lelaki, 84 perempuan) dalam semester kedua Program Persediaan Ijazah Sarjana Muda Perguruan (Pengajian Bahasa English). Data mengenai tahap kebimbangan bahasa diperolehi melalui pentadbiran skala *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)* atau Skala Kebimbangan Kelas Bahasa Asing yang direka oleh Horwitz, Horwitz dan Cope (1986). Berdasarkan jumlah skor dalam skala tersebut, guru praperkhidmatan dikategorikan kepada tiga tahap kebimbangan bahasa, iaitu kebimbangan bahasa yang rendah, kebimbangan bahasa yang sederhana, dan kebimbangan bahasa yang tinggi. Guru-guru praperkhidmatan juga dikehendaki bertindak balas terhadap soal selidik yang mengandungi 22 item mengenai pilihan pedagogi mereka dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan guru praperkhidmatan tahap kebimbangan bahasa yang rendah lebih suka melakukan aktiviti secara bersendirian, terlibat dalam latihan lisan, mengambil bahagian dalam main peranan, drama, simulasi dan permainan berbanding dengan guru praperkhidmatan tahap kebimbangan bahasa yang tinggi. Sebab-sebab guru praperkhidmatan suka atau tidak suka aktiviti-aktiviti pedagogi tertentu juga turut dipersembahkan. Implikasi pedagogi penemuan kajian dan cadangan untuk penyelidikan selanjutnya disertakan dalam artikel ini.

Kata Kunci: kebimbangan bahasa, pilihan pedagogi, Bahasa Inggeris, guru praperkhidmatan

Introduction

Language Anxiety

Research has confirmed the existence of language anxiety and its effects on foreign and second language (L2) learning, pointing to reciprocity between anxiety and proficiency (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Campbell and Ortiz (1991) estimated that up to half of all language students experience debilitating levels of language anxiety, while Horwitz *et al.* (1986) found that language anxiety may cause students to postpone language study indefinitely or to change majors. Language anxiety is generally defined as an emotional state during which a person has "subjective feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry

associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986, p. 125). These negative feelings can have both negative and positive effects, and it can motivate and facilitate as well as disrupt and inhibit cognitive actions such as learning. Although there is still controversy concerning whether language anxiety is the cause (Scovel, 2001; Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001) or consequence of poor language learning (Sparks, Ganschow, & Javorsky, 2000), numerous empirical studies have proven that there is a negative relationship between anxiety and language learning. High anxiety often takes the form of distraction or self-related cognition such as excessive self-evaluation, worry over potential failure and concern over the opinion of others. Such concerns impair task performance through cognitive interference in performing specific tasks. Learning a foreign or L2 language is therefore a psychologically unsettling process for students experiencing language anxiety. Among Malaysian pre-service teachers, this problem of English language learning anxiety also exists, as shown in a recent study on anxiety coping strategies by Wong (2012). One of the aims of the present study therefore, was to assess the extent of pre-service teachers’ anxiety in learning English among this particular group of pre-service teachers.

Pedagogical Preferences and Language Anxiety

Pedagogical preferences refer to the learners’ preferred choice of teaching and learning activities carried out in the classroom. Students have different preferences about teaching and learning, and different responses to specific classroom environments and instructional practices. Pedagogical preferences of learners influence their quality of learning in the classroom. Understanding these preferences is of paramount importance in the teaching and learning process because the learning environment can either support or inhibit the learners’ intentional cognition and active engagement (Soo, 1999). In developing strategies for increasing learner involvement, a key factor is the extent to which these strategies are compatible with learners’ own expectations and preferences. According to Benson and Nunan (2005), in recent years there has been a growing interest in ‘learners’ voices’ in an attempt to better understand learners’ motivations, reasons for success, dropping out, and learners’ choices in how they approach the language learning process. Therefore, in deciding on strategies for increasing learner involvement, it is important to consider the extent to which the strategies are compatible with students’ pedagogical preferences. As Schmidt (2004) pointed out, learning will only be effective when students are motivated to do things that are interesting, relevant to their goals and enjoyable. It is only then that they will be more ready to engage with what is taking place and the learning that takes place will then be more effective. Educators should therefore make an effort to find out what are the pedagogical activities their students prefer and implement these activities to ensure learning is effective and enjoyable. Findings from such studies inform teachers of their students’ needs and wants and how their teaching is

being received. By taking these wishes into consideration in the teaching decision making process, educators are more likely to foster the enthusiasm of language learners. In addition, by knowing learners' worries or misleading perceptions, teachers may make timely interventions by raising awareness of the 'right' strategies, explaining the rationale of activities, or instructing students on how to proceed with tasks.

A review of previous research shows that the link between language anxiety and pedagogical preferences of students has not been widely researched into although there have been some studies on the relation between motivation and pedagogical preferences (Jacques, 2001; Ockert, 2011; Schmidt & Watanabe, 2001). For example, Schmidt, Boraie, and Kassabgy (1996) reported that students who scored high on the affect dimension of motivation welcomed communicative classes while those low on that dimension tended to reject the communicative classroom. Meanwhile, Schmidt and Watanabe (2001) found that a liking of challenging activities in the classroom was most affected by motivation to learn. Although the literature shows a negative relationship between language anxiety and motivation to learn (Liu & Huang, 2011; Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999), it cannot be assumed that the findings for the relation between pedagogical preferences and motivation reflect the relation between anxiety and pedagogical preferences. There is, therefore, a need for studies to explore the link between language anxiety and pedagogical preferences of language learners. In view of the scarcity of literature, locally as well as elsewhere, on pedagogical preferences of students (and pre-service teachers) of different language anxiety levels, a further aim of this study was to advance research in this area through investigating pedagogical preferences of HLA and LLA pre-service teachers.

The Present Study

The present study aimed to assess the extent of language anxiety of pre-service teachers of English and also find out what were the pedagogical preferences of HLA and LLA pre-service teachers and their reasons for preferring specific pedagogical activities. This need to investigate into their extent of language anxiety and pedagogical preferences in learning English becomes even more compelling when they are being trained to be future teachers of English. Before these pre-service teachers can be effective teachers of English, their pedagogical preferences have to be met so that they will be able to improve their proficiency in English. The pedagogical implications that can be drawn from the findings of this study will be useful to teacher educators in their efforts to create more effective lessons tailored to the needs and preferences of pre-service teachers. Specifically, this study aimed to find the answers to the following research questions:

1. What was the extent of language anxiety of pre-service teachers?
2. How did pedagogical preferences of high and low language anxiety pre-service teachers differ?
3. What were HLA and LLA pre-service teachers' reasons for liking or disliking specific pedagogical activities?

Method

Participants

Participants were 113 pre-service teachers (29 males, 84 females) in the second semester of the Foundation Program for a B. Ed. (TESL) Program in a Teachers' Education Institute. The pre-service teachers were in five intact groups randomly selected from six groups available. The mean age of the participants was 19.19 years ($SD = .47$). All the pre-service teachers were non-native speakers of English; however they had studied English as a subject in school for at least 12 years.

Instruments

Language Anxiety Scale

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et al., 1986), which had 32 items, was used to assess pre-service teachers' language anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1986) developed the FLCAS, which consists of three related anxieties: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. According to Horwitz (1986), the internal consistency measure of FLCAS showed an alpha coefficient of .93; test-retest reliability over eight weeks showed an $r = .83$ ($p < .001$), and the predictive validity coefficient for final grade was .49 ($p < .003$). This scale has been widely used in its adapted and translated version to assess language anxiety among L2 learners of different nationalities and academic levels including pre-service teachers (Aida, 1994; Horwitz, 1991; Merç, 2011; Rodríguez, 1995). The Alpha reliability coefficient for the present sample ($N = 113$) is .91. As in the original FLCAS, pre-service teachers were required to indicate their level of agreement with each of the statements based on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Items that indicate anxiety were given a score of 5 points each while those that did not indicate anxiety were given a score of 1 point each.

Questionnaire on Pedagogical Preferences

A questionnaire entitled "What are your preferred ways of learning English?" (adapted from Pham Thi Hanh, 2005) consisting of 22 items, was developed to obtain data on pre-service teachers' pedagogical preferences.

The items included various learning activities such as reading, (2 items), writing, (2 items), speaking (5 items), listening (3 items), learning grammar (3 items), participation modes (4 items), and other activities such as games, role play/drama/simulations and listening to English songs/watching English movies (3 items). For each item, pre-service teachers were required to indicate their preference for the activity on a 5-point Likert scale, that is, 1 = *dislike very much*, 2 = *dislike*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *like*, and 5 = *like very much*. As can be seen, the word *like* made no distinction between activities learners enjoyed and those they found useful. Students were free to interpret *like* in either way. The initial pool of items was piloted on a representative sample of pre-service teachers ($N = 20$) not involved in the actual study. For those activities that they had never experienced in class, they were required to indicate it in a separate column titled '*No experience*' and they were also required to write down any other activity not listed in the questionnaire that they enjoyed during English class. Perusal of pre-service teachers' responses involved in the pilot study showed that they had experienced all of the activities listed in the questionnaire and some of them mentioned an additional activity that is, "watching English movies". Following that, appropriate adjustments were made to the questionnaire for the actual data collection. The questionnaire also had an open-ended question section where pre-service teachers were requested to choose two activities that they liked most and two activities that they disliked most and write down the reasons for liking or disliking each activity chosen.

Procedure

The language anxiety scale was administered to each intact class by the researcher in this study. To reduce sensitization effects, pre-service teachers were told that they were involved in a study on how they felt about learning English and the instrument was entitled "How I feel in English Class" instead of "Language Anxiety Scale." They were advised to read the statements carefully and respond honestly to each of them. Following that, pre-service teachers were given the questionnaire on pedagogical preferences to complete. They managed to complete the questionnaire in about 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

Pre-service teachers' extent of language anxiety was obtained through summing up their scores in the scale after reverse scoring had been done for the appropriate items in the scale. Based on their total scores, pre-service teachers were placed in one of three levels of language anxiety that is, high, moderate and low language anxiety. Pedagogical preferences of HLA and LLA pre-service teachers were compared through computing the effect size for each learning activity in the pedagogical preferences questionnaire. Pre-service teachers' reasons for liking or disliking specific pedagogical activities were content analyzed and summarized.

Findings and Discussion

Extent of Language Anxiety of Pre-service Teachers

Pre-service teachers' language anxiety score was obtained through summing up their scores in the language anxiety scale. Based on their scores, pre-service teachers were then placed into one of three levels of language anxiety. Low language anxiety (LLA) pre-service teachers were those who attained a score of more than one standard deviation (*SD*) below the mean ($M = 96.30$, $SD = 18.70$). Moderate language anxiety (MLA) pre-service teachers were those who attained a score within the range of one *SD* below and one *SD* above the mean while high language anxiety (HLA) pre-service teachers were those who attained a score of more than one *SD* above the mean. Table 1 presents the range of scores and number of pre-service teachers for each level. The finding that 15% of the pre-service teachers experienced high levels of anxiety in English class is not surprising for non-native speakers of English (Horwitz, 1996) and suggests the need for immediate steps to address the problem while these future teachers of English are still in the Foundation Year of their training. As future teachers of English, these pre-service teachers may be experiencing some amount of pressure to do well in English, thus adding to their feelings of anxiety in learning English. However, the fact that these pre-service teachers do experience some measure of language anxiety can also be interpreted in a positive way in that in future, they will be better able to understand school students who are experiencing the same problem.

Table 1

Distribution of pre-service teachers according to level of language anxiety

Anxiety Level	LLA	MLA	HLA
Range of scores	41-76	77-115	116-142
No. of pre-service teachers	21	75	17
Percentage	18.6	66.4	15.0

Pedagogical Preferences of HLA and LLA Pre-service Teachers

Low language anxiety and HLA pre-service teachers' preferences for specific learning activities were compared through computing the effect size r for each of the 22 activities in the questionnaire. Table 2 presents the five learning activities with medium ($r = 0.34$) to large ($r = 0.56$) effect sizes between LLA and HLA pre-service teachers' mean scores. The findings indicate that compared to HLA pre-service teachers, LLA pre-service teachers have greater preference for working individually at learning tasks (Items 4, 7, and 18), and for taking part in oral exercises (Item 9) and role

plays, drama, simulations and games (Item 21). Some of the reasons for such preferences will be discussed in the next section.

Table 2

Means, standard deviations and effect sizes for differences between pedagogical preferences of HLA (n = 17) and LLA (n = 21) pre-service teachers

Item No.	Item	Category	Mean	SD	Effect Size <i>r</i>
4	Writing short passages individually	LLA	4.19	0.87	0.45
		HLA	3.06	1.30	
7	Giving individual oral presentation	LLA	4.19	0.98	0.56
		HLA	2.65	1.27	
9	Taking part in oral exercises (grammar, pronunciation drills)	LLA	4.24	0.94	0.35
		HLA	3.47	1.13	
18	Working individually on tasks	LLA	3.90	1.14	0.34
		HLA	3.00	1.37	
21	Taking part in role plays/drama /simulations	LLA	4.57	0.75	0.43
		HLA	3.59	1.23	

Reasons for Liking and Disliking the Pedagogical Activities

The open-ended question section of the questionnaire provided interesting information on pre-service teachers' reasons for liking or disliking specific pedagogical activities. Table 3 presents LLA pre-service teachers' verbatim responses as to why they liked the pedagogical activities listed in Table 2. Low language anxiety pre-service teachers' responses show that they prefer to work alone or take part in role plays, drama, simulations or games because these activities give them the autonomy to express themselves, to be creative, and also help to increase their self-confidence in writing and doing oral presentations.

Table 3

Low language anxiety pre-service teachers' reasons for liking the activities

Item No.	Item	Reasons
4	Writing short passages individually	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I want to be evaluated based on my own knowledge - Helps to test my vocabulary and also my knowledge of grammar and sentence structure - Because I get the chance to show my fullest potential in writing English - I love to write! Through writing I can express my thoughts and ideas I have in mind
7	Giving individual oral presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It can help me to be more confident and trains me to rely on myself rather than others - Through this activity I can increase my self confidence in talking in front of others - It gives me the chance to practice my English and boost my confidence
9	Taking part in oral exercises (grammar, pronunciation drills)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I want to speak English spontaneously and I have a lot of opinions I want to share
18	Working individually on tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It shows me how well I understand the task - By working individually I am able to become a better learner - I can use my creativity without being rejected - I prefer doing research by myself; I learn better
21	Taking part in role plays/drama/ simulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I will experience it by myself, I will know what exactly is happening and what the excitement is all about - Through these activities I can increase my self confidence to communicate in English

Meanwhile, Table 4 presents HLA pre-service teachers' reasons for disliking the same activities presented in Table 2. The responses show that HLA pre-service teachers reasons for disliking the activities were (1) lack of self-confidence in completing tasks individually, (2) afraid of making mistakes in front of others and being laughed at by them, and (3) no confidence in their ability to act in role plays, drama and simulations. The above findings provide a glimpse into how HLA pre-service teachers actually feel in English class. This also explains their learning behavior, for example, why they tend to be reticent, passive and avoid active participation in

learning activities in English class. These findings concerning HLA pre-service teachers concur with those of other researchers (MacIntyre, & MacDonald, 1998; Pribyl, Keaten & Sakamoto, 2001; Woodrow, 2006; Young, 1990) who also found that public speaking or oral presentations were highly stressful activities for HLA learners. None of the HLA pre-service teachers selected taking part in oral exercises (grammar, pronunciation drills) (Item 9) as one of the activities that they disliked the most, probably because this activity is a familiar activity regularly conducted in schools.

Table 4

High language anxiety pre-service teachers' reasons for disliking the activities

Item No.	Item	Reasons
4	Writing short passages individually	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I don't like it because when I am alone, my idea is so limited; I prefer discussion or group work more than working alone - I hate it because it is hard to find the main points - I am afraid to make mistakes and afraid that people will look down at me and laugh when they are reading it
7	Giving individual oral presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I feel very nervous standing in front of the class but I keep denying it - I get nervous easily and forget about what I want to say - I always get nervous when I do an oral presentation all by myself - Even though I have prepared myself for it, I will not feel confident because I'm afraid that the audience will laugh at me
18	Working individually on tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I am often late in completing the task when working by myself - Tension
21	Taking part in role plays/drama /simulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I am not really interested in these activities because I do not have any talent - I hate it because my pronunciation is not good and may affect my relationship with friends - I do not like to act and it is difficult to make facial expressions - I don't have confidence to act as I am sure that I have no talent in those activities

Conclusion

Summary

The findings in this study provide valuable insights into the pedagogical preferences of LLA and HLA pre-service teachers. The findings showed LLA pre-service teachers appeared to have greater preference for working individually at learning tasks and taking part in more active learning activities such as role plays, drama, simulations or games compared to the HLA counterparts. High language anxiety pre-service teachers appeared to find these activities intimidating because of low self-confidence and fear of making mistakes or being laughed at by others.

Implications

A number of pedagogical implications can be put forward based on the findings of this study. Generally, the findings suggest that English lecturers should use a variety of teaching and learning strategies to cater to the different needs and preferences of HLA and LLA pre-service teachers such as working on tasks individually or in groups and occasionally having interactive as well as fun-filled and exciting activities.

Initially, English lecturers could perhaps provide HLA students with more opportunities to succeed at learning tasks and thus build up their self-confidence regarding learning English. This lack of self-confidence is reflected in their comments about fear of making mistakes or being laughed at and no confidence in their ability to do certain tasks well. Learning tasks that are less challenging could be given to them so that they are able to complete them easily and thus raise their self-confidence. According to Bandura (1997), enactive mastery experiences will strengthen students' self-efficacy and enhance their performance attainments.

Apart from that, providing more opportunities for pre-service teachers to interact with each other will enhance learning for those who need the support of their peers in completing learning tasks. This is because the HLA pre-service teachers indicated that they disliked working alone on tasks. English lecturers may want to employ cooperative learning strategies to provide an environment where pre-service teachers work together to achieve a common goal. Cooperative learning has been found to be effective in promoting social-interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), enhancing language learning (Noorchaya Yahya & Huie, 2002; Oxford, 1997; Zhang, 2010), and reducing foreign language anxiety (McCafferty, Jacobs & DaSilva Iddings, 2006; Ning, 2011; Suwantarathip & Woolfolk, 2010). The HLA pre-service teachers will benefit from cooperative learning as it fosters active participation, a sense of community and emotional support, and provides more opportunities for students to communicate in English.

Once the HLA pre-service teachers become more confident in their ability to communicate in English, they will be more keen to take part in fun-filled and exciting activities such as games, drama, singing, role plays and simulations. Actually, these activities help to provide pre-service teachers with a more relaxed socio-emotional environment which will in turn reduce tension and make learning less stressful for those who lack confidence or experience language anxiety. Young (1990), in a study involving university and high school students, found that teachers who used humour and created a friendly, supportive and relaxed classroom atmosphere that encouraged risk-taking were helpful in alleviating language anxiety and facilitating learning.

According to Hurd (2008), affect and cognition are increasingly seen as multidimensional, overlapping and interdependent constructs and as such, promoting the use of affective strategies is as important as promoting the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to enhance language learning. Perhaps English lecturers could promote learning in English classes through relaxation activities or instruction on stress management. Oxford (1990) suggested three types of affective strategies that can be used to regulate learner attitudes, motivation, and emotions, namely strategies for anxiety reduction, self-encouragement and monitoring emotions. High language anxiety pre-service teachers may also need instruction on how to employ anxiety coping strategies, particularly affective strategies, to help them handle their feelings of anxiety in English class (Hurd & Xiao, 2010; Kondo & Yang, 2004; Oxford, 1990).

Suggestions for Further Research

The findings of this study are limited to the pre-service teachers involved in this study. Replication of this study involving similar respondents from other institutes of education in Malaysia will add to the generalizability of the findings. Future researchers may want to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions concerning which activities are more useful or more effective in learning English. It would also be interesting to assess pre-service teachers' motivation to learn and find out how this is related to their pedagogical preferences and language anxiety.

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