Anxiety Towards Learning of English among Universiti Pertanian Malaysia Students

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ABSTRAK

Seramai 1215 orang pelajar tahun pertama dari Universiti Pertanian Malaysia telah mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini. Objektif kajian adalah untuk (a) menentukan tahap kerisauan dari segi beberapa pembolehubah klasifikasi, iaitu kumpulan etnik, jenis sekolah, jantina, tempat asal dan fakulti pengajian. Alat kajian yang digunakan telah diubahsuai daripada State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) yang dibentuk oleh Spielberger. Akan tetapi, bagi kajian ini hanya kerisauan keadaan sahaja yang diukur. Keputusan kajian menunjukkan bahawa tahap kerisauan adalah tinggi dalam keempat-empat bidang kemahiran bahasa, terutama sekali dalam lisan dan penulisan. Terdapat perbezaan yang signifikan bagi tahap kerisauan di kalangan pelajar dari segi ke lima-lima pembolehubah klasifikasi.

ABSTRACT

A total of 1215 first year students from Universiti Pertanian Malaysia became the subjects in this study. The objectives of this study were to (a) determine the level of anxiety in English language learning and (b) explain anxiety in terms of a few classification variables, viz., ethnicity, school type, gender, place of origin and faculty of study. The instrument for the study was adapted from Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) However, for the purpose of the study, only the state anxiety was measured. The results showed that the level of anxiety is high for all four language skill, especially for speaking and writing. There are significant differences in the level of anxiety among students in terms of the five classification variables.

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is one area of research that has caused much disagreement among researchers. Anxiety may be defined as an emotional state characterised by feelings of apprehension, uncertainty, or tension arising from anticipation of a threat, real or imagined (Papalia and Olds 1985). Individuals react with varying degrees of anxiety depending on their own individual tendencies to be anxious and on the type of threat they are responding to.

With that in mind, Spielberger (1972) utilised the state-trait anxiety differences to create the two-factor theory. He stated that, anxiety is an unpleasant emotional state. This situation arises when the individual feels tensed, anxious or depressed. These are accompained by the stimulation of the autonomic central nervous system. The State-anxiety condition is aroused when the individual perceives a situation as dangerous and threatening. The State-anxiety phenomenon refers to specific situation that differs according to intensity and time. On the other hand, trait-anxiety is not specific in nature and is more concerned with the personality of the person who tends to be anxious. Thus, if a person experiences high trait anxiety, chances are he will experience high state anxiety, compared to another person who possesses low trait anxiety.

Different anxiety studies have used different instrument to measure this psychological construct. According to Rishardson and Woolfolk (1980), there exists certain features in any school subjects that causes anxiety for some individuals. The same situation is true for the English language. For example, Baxter (1987) reported that when students have difficulty in writing, it is often because they are apathetic or afraid of failing, rather than because ot the lack of specific skill. Anxiety and frustration may also be caused by undue emphasis on superficial errors in grammar and spelling, and not due to content. However, the other researchers have identified other characteristics of writing anxiety. For example, Holladay (1981) found that students became frightened by the demand for writing competency; they were afraid of being evaluated in their writing because of the fear of the negative rating; and when they are forced to write, they behaved in a negative manner which leads to the avoidance of writing whenever possible.

When students do not like writing, this situation eventually leads to anxiety and lack of enthusiasm in writing. Writing has become a task rather than a pleasure.

Allen (1985), reported that among the 242 international students in his study, Asian and Latin American students showed high levels of communication apprehension. In contrast, Delgado-Monge (1988) found that students' level of communication apprehension did not affect English proficiency. Rather, anxiety might be attributed to students'

inability to identify behaviours and responses that were expected to lead to successful outcomes. Klopf, Cambra and Croker (1979) noted that the communication apprehension occured in communication situations, and the anxiety syndrome surfaced only when some forms of communication became imminent. They found evidence that 20% or more students suffered from communication apprehension, which consequently interfered with their ability to communicate normally. Because of their oral ineffectiveness, high anxiety was not perceived positively. This negative perception affected their understanding of the language which in turn affected academic performance.

At Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (UPM), all students are required to pass the three level the English Proficiency courses in order to graduate. Such a requirement could therefore create anxiety towards learning English among students. In addition, the different four language skills required, namely, reading, writing, comprehension and speaking may create anxiety among students.

The purpose of this study is to see how anxiety is related to the learning of English among the UPM students.

The instrument used in this study is a modified version of Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). The STAI is comprised of separate self-report scales for measuring two distinct anxiety concepts: state anxiety (A-State) and trait anxiety (A-Trait).

The STAI A-Trait scale consist of 20 statements that ask subjects to describe how they generally feel. The A-State scale also consist of 20 statements, but the instruction require subjects to indicate how they feel at a particular moment in time. The STAI was designed to be self-administering and may be given either individually or to groups. Complete instructions are printed on the test forms. However, only the state anxiety findings will be reported in this paper.

The objectives of the study are (a) to determine the level of anxiety towards learning English of a group of first year university students and (b) to explain anxiety, toward learning English in terms of a few classification variables, viz., ethnicity, school type, gender, place or origin and faculty of study.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The respondents comprised of 1215 first year students from nine different faculties in UPM. There were 537 (44%) male students and 678 (56%) female students. Of these 879 (72%) were Malays, 223 (18%) Chinese, 71 (5%) Indians and 42 (3%) others. In general most of respondents were

young, with a mean age off 22.7 years. Their ages range between 21–44 years.

In term of place of origin, 491 (41%) students were from rural areas, 407 (33%) from small towns and the remaining 317 (20%) from big towns. About 20% of these students were from fully residential schools, 78% from ordinary day schools and only 1% claimed they were from private schools.

Students' English achievements is average, based on the mean score for English in the SPM examination, which is 4.85. About 21% of the student scored distinctions for the subject, 47% managed to get credits, 24% had passes and 8% were failures.

Instrument

Data for the study were based on the STAI A-State questionnaire. Eighteen items were developed to measure anxiety. Examples of the items were: (1) I am tense whenever I: (i) read English materials, (ii) write in English, (iii) try to understand English, (iv) speak English; (2) I feel upset whenever I:i) read English materials, ii) write in English, iii) try to understand English, iv) speak English. By using the test-retest method, the reliability of the instrument is 61 (Rahil, 1991). The reliability test was conducted by the author herself.

Anxiety Towards English

The level of anxiety for the four areas of English proficiency are determined by taking the mean for each component. In terms of sequence, the highest mean score is for speaking (45.7), followed by writing (45.1), comprehension (42.3) and reading (41.1) (Table 1). A standard deviation of .05 below and above the mean is used to determine the anxiety level of two groups, namely high and low anxiety.

TABLE 1. Levels of anxiety for four language skills

Lang. Skill	Mean Score	Standard deviation	High Anxiety Score	Low Anxiety Score
Speaking	45.7	10.4	51.5	29.9
Writing	45.1	9.4	48.2	42.8
Comprehension	42.3	8.7	47.4	36.4
Reading	41.1	9.0	46.3	35.9

Based on the mean scores for each language skill, the results of the study showed that the students were most anxious in speaking English. More than half (54%) of the students belong to the high anxiety group,

i.e., those scoring 51.5 and above for this skill. In terms of writing skill, again more than half (55%) of students belong to the high anxiety category. Both these results suggest that the majority of students tend to be more anxious in their communication skills, i.e., writing and speaking.

Eventhough the mean score for comprehension is lower than speaking and writing, the result indicate that 55% of students belong to the high anxiety category. The same is true for reading, where 54% of students belong to the high anxiety group. It may therefore be concluded that more than half of the respondents were highly anxious in each area of the language skills.

Anxiety and Ethnicity

Table 2 shows the differences in language skills (dependent variables) in terms of ethnicity and anxiety (dependent variables).

TABLE 2. Anxiety in language skills by ethnicity

Lang. Skill	Malay	Chinese	Indian	F-value	Sig.
Speaking	44.03**	39.66*	37.24	49.7	.000
Writing	42.91**	39.39*	37.17	41.5	.000
Reading	39.84**	36.63	34.05	38.1	.000
Comprehension	41.08**	37.70	36.63	34.69	.000

Result of the ANOVA for reading skill show significant difference in the levels of anxiety among the three major ethnic groups, namely, Malays, Chinese and Indian. Eventhough the sample for the Malay students was rather large as compared to the other ethnic groups, it was found that the standard deviation for each of the group did not differ greatly (Table 1). So in this case, the groups may be considered homogenous. Therfore, the analysis shows that the comparison of unequal groups of samples is acceptable. When the mean scores of the three ethnic groups were compared with each other, it was found that the anxiety mean scores for the language skills was the highest among the Malay students (Table 2).

With reference to the Table 2, the mean score for Malay sudents is significantly different from that of Chinese or Indian students for all the four language skills. However, among Chinese students, the mean score is signifcantly different from that of Indian students for speaking and writing skills.

Anxiety and Place of Origin

Result of the ANOVA for reading skill showed significant difference in the levels of anxiety according to place or origin, viz., rural, small town and big town. When the mean scores were compared according to location, it was found that the anxiety mean scores for the four language skills was highest among students from the rural areas (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Anxiety in languages skill by place of origin

Lang. Skill	Rural n = 491	Small Town n = 407	Big Town n = 317	F-Value	Sig.
Speaking	45.06**	42.26*	39.19	47.4	.000
Writing	43.62**	41.54*	39.04	34.6	.000
Reading	41.23**	38.01*	35.89	58.1	.000
Comprehension	42.18**	39.49*	37.43	45.6	.000

As can be seen in Table 3, the mean score for the students from the rural areas is significantly different from small or big towns for all the four language skills. However, among students from the rural areas, the mean score is significantly different from that of students of small or big towns for speaking and writing skills. The results also indicate significant differences in the anxiety scores for all four language skill between students from small towns, and student from big towns. The students from the rural areas seemed to be more anxious compared to the students from small and big towns in terms of language skills.

Anxiety by Faculty

There are altogether ten faculties in UPM offering courses either at the diploma level, undergraduate level, or graduate level. Results of the ANOVA showed that student from six faculties tend to be more anxious with regards to speaking skill. There were also significant differences in the anxiety mean scores for students from faculties for writing and reading skills. However, there was no significant differences in comprehension (Table 4).

TABLE 4. Anxiety in language skills by faculty

Faculty	Speaking	Writing	Reading
Economy & Management	47.53**	41.68	39.75
Agriculture	47.69**	42.32	41.68
Environmental Science	47.94**	43.62*	42.36*
Food Technology	48.07**	41.44	41.41
Engineering	48.38**	43.58	42.35
Human Ecology	48.18**	45.35**	42.12**

* Sig. = .05   **Sig. = .001

Anxiety and Gender

It is generally known that girls have more inclination towards language learning compared to boys (Gaudry and Fitzgerald, 1971). If such is the case, then it is hypothesised that girl should have lower anxiety levels than boys. The results support this hypothesis, even though there is no significant difference in the mean score between male and female students in their speaking skill (Table 5).

TABLE 5. Anxiety in language skills by gender

Lang. Skill	Male	Female	T-Value	Sig.
Speaking	42.84	42.36	0.93	ns
Writing	42.38	41.19	6.80	.01
Reading	39.71	37.97	16.81	.00
Comprehension	40.72	39.48	8.69	.03

Anxiety and Type of School

Schools are categorised as fully residential or non-residential schools. The findings of the study do not show the mean score for the four language skills to be different from one another (Table 6). This means that there is no difference in the level of anxiety with regard to language skill among the students of residential and non-residential schools.

TABLE 6. Anxiety in language skill by type of school

Lang. Skill	Residential	Non-Residential	T-Value	Sig.
Speaking	42.55	43.64	.22	ns
Writing	41.72	41.64	.22	ns
Reading	38.78	37.23	.62	ns
Comprehension	40.02	40.59	.07	ns

Anxiety Towards English

Apart from analysing anxiety in specific language skills, the study also looked at anxiety towards the English language as a whole. The overall anxiety towards English shows that students from three faculties tend to be more anxious compared to students from the other faculties (Table 7). The students from the other faculties are not as anxious as those from the three faculties shown in the Table 7. Apart from this, as a whole, the findings do not show anxiety towards English to be more significantly different according to gender, place of origin, ethnicity or type of school.

TABLE 7. Anxiety towards English by faculty

Faculty	Mean Score
Economy & Management	47.53**
Environmental Science	47.94**
Engineering	48.38**

**Sig. = .001

DISCUSSION

This study shows that, in general students are anxious in their learning of English. Although the results show that the Malay students tend to be more anxious than Chinese or Indian students, and that students from rural areas are more anxious than students from small or urban towns in all four language skills, the highest anxiety scores are for speaking and writing skills. This aspect is particulary true among students from the four faculties mentioned earlier. These two language skills require students to interact with other people. Thus, it is logical that many of these students are more anxious in these two areas of language competence.

Based on an open-ended item in the questionnaire, it was found that the majority of students perceive English to be difficult. Such a negative perception would unduly affect their anxiety towards learning the different English language skills. In addition, the teaching of English was described as boring, not creative, and lacked the use of audio-visual aids. Perhaps this is related to the teaching styles of teachers involved in teaching English courses at UPM.

The inability to be proficient in English is not only related to teachers' lack of encouragement towards their students but also lack of motivation from their parents. The lack of encouragement from parents as well as teasings that students get from their peer groups, such as, accusing students of trying to be Western, may perhaps have contributed to their inability to be proficient in English. This happens most among Malays students and those students from rural areas as revealed from the open-ended items in the questionnaire. Interacting with others in one's own ethnic group only may also reduce the probability of communicating in English, especially if students believe that it is not important to learn English. When requested to rate their own English proficiency, a majority of students rated themselves to be average in writing as well as speaking and lowest in grammar. This rating may perhaps explain the state of high anxiety among students.

When students lack the skill that are deemed to be important in language learning, particularly in communication skills, i.e. speaking and writing they fail to become proficient. Students have developed a certain kind of fear or apprehension resulting from either real situations or imagined situations.

Students who are highly anxious may experience great fear in every communicative or anticipated encounter. This fear or apprehension may then result in students not speaking at all in English and thus cause them to avoid speaking English altogether. When situations demand that they speak English, they appear to be shy, nonassertive, embaressed, uncomfortable, reticent, at loss for words, and have no confidence.

All the above factors seem to be related to negative academic impact, especially when a pass in three English proficiency courses is necessary for graduation at UPM. Learning of English is also instrumental in gaining information from English sources. There are also groups of students who would seek employment in the private sector where the use of English is widespread. From the open-ended items in the questionnaire, it was found that many male students perfer to work in the private sector. This is perhaps one of the reasons why male students are more anxious than female students.

Based on the findings of the study, it is therefore necessary to plan certain strategies that would help students reduce their anxiety and at the same time increase their competence in English.

It is therefore necessary for the Ministry of Education to send more English trained teachers to rural schools, where their services are greatly needed to improve students' proficientcy in English.

English teachers should be given training in problem solving techniques and in student counselling. Another is to train teachers in techniques to reduce anxiety.

For example, the success of a West-German English teacher training programme may be emulated in English classes in Malaysia. Videotapes could be made on one's own classroom teaching to replace outdated instructional films. The uses of such videotapes was found to heighten students' motivation and creativity. This technique was found to increase students' confidence and greater readiness to speak the language as well effective in character and behaviour modifications.

The advantage of using this videotaping technology is the active participation of students which promotes substantial gains in language skill and knowledge. As a medium for self-observation, videotaping can be used to reduce anxiety and insecurity to promote the pragmatic use of the language, and to practise communicative measures of students. The many uses of videotaping in the classroom included training, self-observation, observing others, and animation.

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