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Towards an Ecological Understanding of University Students' Anxiety in English as a General Course in Light of Sociocultural Perspective

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Abstract

A large number of research studies have been carried out focusing on the role of anxiety in the process of English language learners' development. However, the multifaceted nature of anxiety needs to be explored from an ecological perspective which can shed more lights and provide a better understanding of the different aspects influencing English language learners' anxiety. This paper takes advantage of Vygotskian sociocultural theory, and activity theory in particular, as a conceptual framework to explore university students' anxiety in English course in the classroom. To do so, data from 21 university students at University of Bojnord, Iran, were collected via semi-structured interviews, classroom observations over three months, and journals recorded by the students. The results of qualitative content analysis based on sociocultural theory indicated that, micro-genetically, the types of activities, assignments, teachers' behaviours and peers' effect influence students' anxiety in the community of classroom. In addition, rules, rooted at the cultural-historic span, in terms of the assessment criteria, curriculum development and classroom syllabus underpin the anxiety experiences of the students. The functions of mediators and the objectives of the classroom regarding the ebbs and tides of students' anxiety are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Foreign language anxiety

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) can be defined as “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language” (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 27). FLA has been associated to a number of learner variables. Lower levels of FLA have been related to authentic use of the foreign language (FL) during the learning phase, authentic practice of the FL during the learning phase, a younger age of onset of acquisition and frequent current use of the FL. On the other hand, a high degree of FLA has been linked to learners' degree of socialization and a large network of people with whom the FL is used (Dewaele, 2013). Dewaele (2013) found insignificant differences in FLA associated to gender. Nevertheless, the older and more highly educated learners had lower level of FLA in their learning processes. The number of languages previously acquired is also linked with lower FLA in native language and FLs (Dewaele, 2010, 2013; Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008; Thompson & Lee, 2012). Levels of FLA have also been found to rise significantly from the L1 to the L2 of pentalinguals (Dewaele, 2013). Additionally, the typological distance between the target language and existing languages in the learners' repertoire affects FLA. If the target language belongs to a familiar linguistic family, anxiety is significantly lower (Dewaele, 2010). Moreover, there is a long list of possible sources of FLA, including harsh error correction (Gregersen, 2003; Young, 1992), self-presentation concerns (Cohen&Norst, 1989), competitiveness among learners (Bailey, 1983), incompatibility between teachers and students (Gregersen&MacIntyre, 2014), personality traits such as neuroticism (Dewaele, 2002, 2013), perfectionism (Dewaele, Finney, Kubota & Almutlaq, 2014; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002), tolerance of ambiguity in the second language (Dewaele&Shan Ip, 2013), and students' negative self-comparisons with others (Horwitz, 2010).

In a study of factors of language anxiety, Trang, Baldauf, and Moni, (2013) discovered that foreign language learners and teachers mentioned similar causes of language anxiety. Both samples showed that language anxiety might be related to learner or teacher, external factors, or the complexity of the English language itself. Factors related to the learners include gender, the capacity to learn a foreign language, attitudes towards learning English, and learning past experiences (Tran et al., 2013). On the other hand, factors associated to the teachers include teachers' professional skills and behaviour (Trang, et al., 2013). Also, external factors could be found in the context of the learning. In addition, the complex nature of the English language itself may lead to language anxiety. Although teachers and students in Tran et al.'s (2013) study pointed to similar types of language anxiety sources, they ranked them differently in terms of how much anxiety a factor may cause. Teachers reported that student-related sources lead to a greater degree of anxiety while students felt teacher-related factors as the most sources of anxiety. Kim (2009) and Koul et al. (2009) also found that external factors like the educational environment may set the stage for a higher level of anxiety. Moreover, educational institutions which evaluate learning progress by tools of formal assessment may contribute to higher level of anxiety in learners, specifically those studying a foreign language. Furthermore, Hashemi (2011) reported, in some learning contexts, learners become highly anxious because they are expected to reach native-like fluency and accuracy.

1.2. Situation specific foreign language anxiety

For many decades, foreign language researchers have been conscious that anxiety occurs as an impediment to language learning and have thus concentrated their attempts on exploring its influences and sources as well as on developing approaches to aid anxious students deal with such feelings to promote overall achievement and performance in the target language (for reviews see Horwitz et al., 2010; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Horwitz and Young (1991) suggested that foreign language anxiety can be conceptualized in two perspectives: (1) as a transfer of other types of anxiety (i.e., trait anxiety, test anxiety, or public speaking anxiety) and (2) as situation-specific anxiety. Early research emphasized the influence of anxiety on second language acquisition advocated the first perspective of anxiety transfer approach and gained unclear and contradictory findings (Horwitz et al., 2010). In his review of studies carried out up to the late 1970s, Scovel (1978) also focused on contradictory and conflicting results of research studies on anxiety and described that, although some studies indicated anxiety had a facilitating effect on second language acquisition, others showed anxiety had a debilitating effect. Scovel (1978) suggested that

thereason for the contradictory findings was that researchers had not defined the type of anxiety they intended to measure, and he proposed that in further studies the type of anxiety aimed to measure as well as its relationship with other affective and cognitive factors should be clearly identified. After Scovel's(1978) suggestion, second language acquisition researchers began to investigate the construct of anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety specific to second language acquisition.

This new perspective to language anxiety was defined by Gardner (1985), hypothesizing that “a construct of anxiety which is not general but instead is specific to the language acquisition context is related to second language achievement” (p. 34). Subsequently, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) maintained that foreign language anxiety is not simply the transfer of other types of anxiety from one domain to the foreign language classroom. Consequently, they conducted a groundbreaking research to identify foreign language anxiety as an anxiety specific to the foreign language classroom and defined FLA as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning experience” (p. 128), a definition which has been widely accepted and utilized in the field since then. Moreover, the field of foreign language education has generally agreed on a negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and language learning suggested by the findings of FLA research (e.g., Aida, 1994; Chen & Lin, 2009; Coryell & Clark, 2009; Elkhafafi, 2005; MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). Hence, teachers have tried to decrease language learner anxiety and make the foreign language classroom experience more relaxed, supportive, and nurturing (e.g., Bigdeli & Bai, 2009; Ewald, 2007; Gregersen, 2005, 2009; Hurd & Xiao, 2010; Powell, 1991; Tran, Baldauf, & Moni, 2013; Young, 1991, 1999).

1.3. Towards an ecological perspective on foreign language anxiety

The individual, environmental effect on situational FLA truly justifies an ecological perspective: Language ecology is defined as the investigation of the interactions between any language and its surrounding environment (Haugen, 2001). It is primarily determined by the people who learn it, who use it, and who transmit it to the others (Haugen, 2001). From an ecological perspective, the significance of context in language learning is an important and focused subject, which is constructed through the social and dynamic interaction between individual and its environment on a moment-by-moment foundation (Van Lier, 2004). An ecological approach to research on language learning is an observation-based approach which focuses on contextual analysis, significant attention to students' activities in the context and explores for patterns associated to the complex process of interactions (Van Lier, 2004).

The ecological perspective views a web of interrelating interactions between learners, teachers, their immediate classroom contexts, and institutional factors. All the elements in the web of interaction are interrelated and indivisible. An ecological perspective need investigating how each element in a context is associated to the others. This can be contextually explained by the Vygotskian sociocultural perspective, and the activity theory in particular (Van Lier, 2004). Recently, the activity theory has been applied in second language. Yu and Lee (2015) stressed the promising application of activity theory and use it in order to explore two Chinese university students' motives for participating in group peer feedback activities in the EFL (English as a foreign language) writing classroom. Adopting the activity theory as frame, Pham and Renshaw (2015) investigated how Vietnamese teachers took into account both traditional practices and contemporary influences to transform formative assessment practices to make them feasible in their classrooms. Moreover, in their research Fazeena, Ekanayaka, and Hewagamage (2015) applied the activity theory model to study the social and technical system relevant to the area of introducing mobile-learning to enhance English language learning among school learners.

1.4. Activity theory

Vygotsky regularly suggested that the mind grows through our interaction with the world around us (Rieber & Carton, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978, 1981) and our interaction with the world is an indirect relationship. In order to master higher mental functions, humans use artifacts (e.g. language, books, and numbers) as mediating means. The concept of Vygotsky's mediation has become investigated and has influenced social sciences. However, Engeström and Miettinen (1999) mentioned that Vygotsky's concept of mediation is problematic because of its exclusive

emphasis on the individual performing actions in a world of objects rather than the idea of historicity and the collective nature of human activity. Engeström and Miettinen (1999) noted “individuals act in collective practices, communities, and institutions. Such collective practices are not reducible to sums of individual action; they require theoretical conceptualization in their own right” (p. 11). To identify the criticisms, other researchers, led by Leontiev (1981), extended Vygotsky’s mediation concept to what is known as activity theory (Engeström, 1987; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Smidt, 2009). Although Leontiev (1981) and colleagues developed Vygotsky’s concept of mediation by significantly making a distinction between individual action and a collective activity, the graphic model of collective activity system was developed by Engeström (1987). Based on the model, the activity includes the subject, tools, object, rules, community, and division of labour. The main focus of the analysis is the production part which involves the subject (the individual or group of actors engaged in the activity), tools (anything mediating the transformation process) and the object (what is acted on or aimed at by the subject). However, the subject, tools, and object do not exist in a vacuum but are located in a context and they must be investigated in the context, which is consisted of the community (the immediate environment where all the other components of the system are inserted), rules (the norms regulating the subject’s actions), and division of labour (the allocation of responsibility to the community members in relation to the object). This social part of the activity system is where the limitation of Vygotsky’s individual focus is overcome.

Activity theory offers a unit of analysis for research on the exploration of English language learners, especially in the general English university courses. In analyzing these learners’ anxiety, what the learners think or do cannot be understood without considering their learning context, which is conceptualized as including the community within which their anxiety exists, the rules that regulate their anxiety, and the allocation of roles and responsibilities within the community of their classroom.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants of the present study consisted of 21 (8 males and 13 females) students from the University of Bojnord in Iran. With an average age of 20 and an age range of 18 to 25, the students were from various faculties such as engineering, science, humanities, and physical education. They had all started to learn English at high school and had no previous experience of learning English at language institutes.

2.2. Instruments

The data of the present study was gathered via semi-structured interview, observation, and journal writing.

Semi-structured interview. In order to acquire the insider view of the participants’ anxiety, the semi-structured interviews were carried out individually with each of the 21 students. All interviews were carried out in Persian. The interview covered questions such as their past experiences of learning English, their attitude towards learning English, their attitude towards their English course at university, and reasons for anxiety when participating in English class.

Non-participant observations. Additionally, two non-participant observations were conducted in participants’ class in order to gain contextualized information of students’ justifications of self-reported data gathered from interviews and journals. The observation analysis was made by taking notes during and immediately after class.

Journals. Since observations might function as realizing the actual events taking place in the context rather than judging participants’ FLA, the researchers provided journals that asked learners to record their perceptions, feelings, and performance during that section.

2.3. Procedures and data analysis

In order to analyze the interviews, journals and observations, a qualitative content analysis was applied. The qualitative content analysis is a mixed method approach: assignment of categories to text as qualitative step, working through many text passages and analysis of frequencies of categories as quantitative step. The data analysis

included reading, coding and revising the codes. The coding procedure began by careful reading of the data in order to identify recurring themes and sub-themes. During the coding process, the following main themes were identified: evidence for the presence of FLA, sources and effects of FLA, potential factors accounting for the development of FLA. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of data collection and interpretation the peer debriefing were used.

3. Results and discussion

A wide range of factors as well as issues affecting students' anxiety in the language classroom were identified and mapped to the dimensions in the Activity Theory. These factors could be categorized at three main levels: pedagogical level, individual level, and community level. Factors at the pedagogical level are mainly concerned with the classroom context and usability of the tools for learning English; those at the individual level related to students' linguistic and psychological elements and their perceived affordances of the tools. The factors at the environmental level, including roles of members, and rules of community, such as social and cultural elements, are possibly the most influential factors in effect. In this section of the paper, we will closely examine the factors at each level.

3.1. Pedagogical level

First, during the interview session, evaluative and stressful classroom settings were found to be the main sources of high and low levels of classroom anxiety by the selected subjects of the current study. During the interview session, 12 participants reported that in their classroom activities, their scores were influenced by the mistakes they made. For example one of the highly anxious students blamed the context of the class:

“Our class, such a competitive air, with my classmates fighting to score high does unbearably go on my nerve (Participant #12).”

Second, students' experiences with their English language teacher and the materials used in the class shape their attitudes toward their feeling of apprehension in the class. 16 students stated that their teacher gave effective feedback to students and, as a result, this reduced their level of anxiety. Moreover, 13 students stated that when their teachers used L1 they could communicate and understand them better which reduced their anxiety as a consequence. Additionally, 7 students mentioned that their teacher had a good sense of humour that could motivate and comfort them whenever they felt anxious. During the oral interviews, one of the students expressed her attitude with the comments below:

“Letting my hair down in the class with my teacher giving feedback on my mistakes in L1! So comfiiii!!!” (Participant #3)

On the other hand, 5 students mentioned to the teacher's reactions to their mistakes as an important source of anxiety. To give a few examples:

So embarrassing the teacher correcting me in front of the whole class, I am loaded uneasy and mounted on hearing things like "You should have known this ages ago!" (Participant #6)

Furthermore, 6 students said that learning English is challenging due to the inefficient materials used in the class. For instance, interviewee 18 stated that:

“In our class we read and practice activities of no minute chance of improving our listening and speaking.

The texts are so difficult that my hair stands on end and my blood freezes facing them (Participant #13).”

In this respect, the findings of this study confirm those of previous research projects that underscore the important role of pedagogical factors effecting language anxiety (Liu & Ni, 2015; Rassaei, 2015; Tóth, 2011).

3.2. Individual level

During the interviews with the selected participants, two main sources were also held responsible for language learners' high as well as low levels of anxiety at the individual level: psychological and linguistic sources.

3.2.1. Psychological sources

There are various psychological variables that make ESL/EFL learners anxious in setting of learning English. These diverse psychological variables that have been highlighted by the participants include learners' self-confidence, and learners' fear of negative evaluation.

First, analyzing the interviews of 21 participants, the current research found that learners' self-confidence was directly linked to their low or high level of anxiety. Obviously, the low self-confident learners were more anxious in circumstances where they had to communicate in English. During the interview with the participants, one of the highly anxious participants said:

“Sometimes, I think of my English no fluent and accurate confusing teachers to digest my mind puzzles. My writing and speaking are poor as well leaving me with no confidence speaking and writing which ticks me off (Participant #18)?”

Second, participants also mentioned their fear of negative evaluation from peers and teacher. Others' comments, feedback or responses were very important for all participants. 18 students reported that they feel apprehension of being laughed at because they thought that their face was damaged in front of their classmates and teacher. For instances, interviewee 9, in one of her journals said:

“I was assigned to summarize a reading passage for the teacher and my classmates. Sensing the first I felt stressed out for ‘might’ of being humiliated in case of me performing poor and my face being crashed like a juice box (Participant #3).”.

These findings are consistent with some other studies reporting that students' fear of negative evaluation by others is one of the important sources of anxiety (Han, Tanriöver&Şahan, 2016; Tóth, 2011; Wang&Roopchund, 2015).

3.2.2. Linguistic sources

After analyzing the interviews, we also identified that participants' self-perception of their English language competence were found to be another important source of anxiety. Interviews indicated that students with higher level of anxiety expressed dissatisfaction with their L2 proficiency, particularly their speaking skills. Interviewee 8, for instance, complained about the lack of correspondence between the speed of her thoughts and the fluency of her speech, which she found frustrating.

I'm slow in English; I always carry the burden of reading sentences in my head before slipping them out. I cannot map my ideas in words in a jiffy pushing me hard in a stressful zone of heart (Participant #2,journal#4).

Interviewee 13 referred to a similar concern when talking about the anxiety she felt about the gap between her native and foreign language competence. He stated:

“Sometimes I say something in Persian, and then I try finding an equivalent of it in English. Unfortunately, sometimes I cannot do it and it gets me up in arms. (Participant #5, Journal#2)”

The current findings are consistent with those of the previous researchers on language anxiety which identified the students' self- perception as an important source of anxiety (Wang & Roopchund, 2015; Tóth, 2011). Tóth (2011) found that highly anxious students think negative about their own selves and have low-perceived self-esteem about their own performance in the target language.

3.3. Community level

Factors related to community level were also declared to be among the significant factors causing anxiety among ESL/EFL learners in a language classroom. All the participants of this study continuously referred to environmental factors and considered them responsible for their high as well as low levels of anxiety during their interviews. Findings of the research indicated that the effect of social and cultural issues on their anxiety is notable. Based on the observations, one aspect of Iranian cultures are relevant to their level of students' anxiety. Eslami-Rasekh, Tavakoli, and Abdolrezapour (2010) debated Iranian culture falls within the hierarchical relation system in which the status of one individual is superordinate and the status of the other individual is a subordinate one. Therefore, individuals in a lower position are considered to stick to established behavioural norms. Similarly, at schools and universities, students are expected to articulate their linguistic manners; thus, in the classroom, the teacher is considered as the authority. This cultural factor was observed to influence learners' level of anxiety since it leads to an uncomfortable and unfriendly environment in the class. The participants of this study pointed out the strict classroom settings made them feel uncomfortable and feel anxious and stressed. In this strict setting students fear making mistakes and this fear does not let them practice the language confidently. One participant stated that:

“In Iran we look up to our teacher making me feel the teacher is higher than students and is the only voice in the class. Whenever I feel puzzled in my head, I do not feel free asking one bit of a question, afraid of teachers’ authority being jeopardized (Participant #7).”

4. Conclusion

Applying sociocultural activity theory, this study attempts to present a more comprehensive and contextualized picture of the factors influencing students’ anxiety in the university general English classroom. This study also provided empirical evidence for conceptualizing the multidimensional nature of foreign language anxiety. The results lend support to research of Kim (2009), Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), and Gregersen, MacIntyre and Meza (2014) arguing that FLA may be influenced by the multifaceted interaction of different factors in different levels. From the ecological perspective, Iranian learners’ FLA inside the English classroom could be influenced by the different factors in different level. This implies that FLA needs to be understood as a multidimensional construct influenced by the interaction of pedagogical, individual and community factors. The findings of this study have some implications. First, teachers should pay attention to the students’ different personal characteristics, especially students’ degree of self-confidence and self-perception. In addition, teachers can reduce students’ FLA by using a positive and supportive atmosphere in the classroom (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). When learners feel that their performance is judged or misjudged by their teachers and their classmates, they might suffer from the negative evaluation of this strict judgment as a consequence and their levels of FLA will drop.

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