



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**ESL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE ANXIETY**

**NOOR HASHIMA BINTI ABDUL AZIZ**

**FPP 2007 31**



**ESL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE ANXIETY**

**By**

**NOOR HASHIMA BINTI ABDUL AZIZ**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra  
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy**

**October 2007**



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in  
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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**October 2007**

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the language anxiety experiences of students studying English as a second language (ESL) at Universiti Utara Malaysia. This study adopted a qualitative case study approach. The sampling of participants was done through purposive sampling in order to select information-rich cases. The sampling strategy employed was maximum variation sampling to find common patterns among three levels of English language courses and related samples of student participants. Data collection was done through interviewing ESL students and lecturers and also analyzing documents. Nineteen students were interviewed to get their perspectives on the language anxiety phenomenon. In order to understand language anxiety, four components were investigated: the sources of language anxiety, anxiety reactions, coping strategies and effects of language anxiety. Three major themes, three minor themes and two unexpected themes emerged from this study in relation to the sources of language anxiety. It



was discovered that the language anxiety experienced by the participants stemmed from the learners themselves, lecturers' instructional practice, social and cultural influence. In terms of language anxiety reactions, seven themes emerged from this study. This study also found eight strategies used by the participants to cope with language anxiety. Explanation on the effects of language anxiety focused more on the subtle effects based on the experiences shared by the participants in this study. The study concluded that language anxiety is a prevalent phenomenon among the participants. All the participants expressed experiencing anxiety but at various degrees such as low, moderate or high. Speaking and writing were the two language skills most associated with sources of language anxiety. Debilitating anxiety was a common experience among the participants with one exception. Some implications for the learners, lecturers, peers, and course developers are stated briefly. Some recommendations are also suggested for further study.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PERSPEKTIF PELAJAR BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA  
KEDUA TENTANG KEBIMBANGAN BAHASA**

Oleh

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Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki pengalaman para pelajar di Universiti Utara Malaysia berkaitan dengan kebimbangan bahasa semasa mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kajian kes secara kualitatif. Sampel peserta kajian dilakukan mengikut sampel bermakna untuk memilih kes-kes bermaklumat-tinggi. Strategi persampelan yang digunakan adalah persampelan variasi maksimum untuk mencari pola kesamaan bagi tiga tahap kursus-kursus Bahasa Inggeris serta persampelan peserta kajian. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan menemubual pelajar-pelajar Bahasa Inggeris serta pensyarah, dan juga menganalisis dokumen. Sembilan belas pelajar telah ditemubual untuk mendapatkan perspektif mereka mengenai fenomena kebimbangan bahasa. Untuk memahami kebimbangan bahasa, empat komponen telah diselidiki: sumber kebimbangan bahasa, reaksi terhadap kebimbangan



bahasa, strategi mengatasi kebimbangan bahasa, dan kesan akibat kebimbangan bahasa. Dari segi sumber-sumber kebimbangan bahasa, tiga tema utama, tiga tema minor dan dua tema tidak dijangkakan timbul daripada kajian ini. Pengalaman mengenai kebimbangan bahasa yang diceritakan oleh peserta-peserta kajian ini didapati berpunca daripada mereka sendiri, amalan pengajaran pensyarah, pengaruh sosial dan budaya. Dari segi reaksi kebimbangan bahasa, tujuh tema timbul daripada kajian ini. Kajian ini juga menemui lapan strategi yang digunakan oleh peserta-peserta untuk mengatasi kebimbangan bahasa. Penerangan mengenai kesan daripada kebimbangan bahasa bertumpu kepada kesan tidak ketara berdasarkan pengalaman yang dikongsi oleh peserta-peserta dalam kajian ini. Kajian ini merumuskan bahawa kebimbangan bahasa adalah satu fenomena yang lumrah di kalangan peserta kajian. Kesemua peserta mengaku mengalami kebimbangan bahasa tetapi pada tahap yang berlainan seperti rendah, sederhana dan tinggi. Percakapan dan penulisan adalah dua kemahiran bahasa yang paling dikaitkan dengan sumber-sumber kebimbangan bahasa. Kebimbangan negatif merupakan pengalaman biasa di kalangan peserta dengan satu pengecualian. Implikasi kepada pelajar sendiri, pensyarah, rakan sedarjah, penggubal kursus dinyatakan secara ringkas. Beberapa syor juga telah diberikan untuk kajian lanjut.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not have been completed without the support and encouragement from the following people. First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the chairman, Dr. Arshad Abdul Samad and the other two members of the thesis supervisory committee, Dr Shamsuddin Ahmad and Dr. Habsah Ismail for their guidance, and encouragement.

I would also like to express my deepest gratitude and heartfelt appreciation to my father, Haji Abdul Aziz Bin Haji Ahmad, my mother, Hajjah Che Puteh Bte Haji Hanafi, my husband, Mohamed Bin Ali, and my son, Syaheeran Bin Mohamed for their love, support and encouragement throughout this long and challenging journey.

I am thankful to the nineteen participants at Universiti Utara Malaysia and also the lecturers at the Faculty of Communication and Modern Languages, Universiti Utara Malaysia for their willingness to take part in the interview sessions.



I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 25 October 2007 to conduct the final examination of Noor Hashima Binti Abdul Aziz on her doctoral degree thesis entitled “ESL Students’ Perspectives on Language Anxiety” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## **DECLARATION**

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.

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**NOOR HASHIMA BINTI ABDUL AZIZ**

Date: 4 February 2008



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UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**2007**





## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Background of the Study**

Some researchers believe that learning a second language or a foreign language is different from learning other subjects. Cohen and Norst (1989), for example, suggest the double bind aspect which exists when learning a language but not when learning other subjects. The double bind aspect means that “language and self are so closely bound, if not identical, that an attack on one is an attack on the other” (Cohen and Norst, 1989, p. 61). In language classes, learners are taking a risk whether they keep quiet or they speak. For example, when learners speak in language classes they are taking the risk of giving the wrong answers. If they give the wrong answers, they face the possibility of being ridiculed by their teachers and peers. On the other hand, when language learners keep quiet in language classes, they are taking the risk of being embarrassed for not knowing the answers. When they remain as passive language learners, their teachers may think that they do not understand the lessons being taught or lack the confidence to speak. In terms of such risk-taking, Beebe (1983) suggests that learners take moderate risk-taking in language classes.



Besides the double bind aspect, the dual task aspect proposed by Foss and Reitzel (1988) is also unique to language classes but not to other classes. In language classes, learners have two tasks to accomplish, that is, to learn and also to perform. When doing language tasks, for example, learners may get the correct answers but they may still make grammatical mistakes in the tasks. On the other hand, a communication class is mainly concerned with performance rather than learning the subject matter. In relation to performance, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) believe that performing in a language class can be more stressful than performing in other subjects because it may challenge a person's self-concept as a competent communicator which will lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic.

Another difference between learning a language and learning other subjects is that learning a language involves a fairly intense cognitive activity which could create problems compared to learning other subjects (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). There is also a great possibility that language learners have "negative thoughts" that can interfere with their work (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991a, p. 297). For example, in language classes, learners have to comprehend the meaning of a message and then respond to that message verbally or in writing. This demand on them may create negative thoughts such as "I think I am not good in English". To sum up, due to the double bind aspect, the dual task aspect and the intense cognitive activity which are unique to language classes, most learners may experience anxiety in language classes.



The research on anxiety in language learning has gained popularity since the 1990s (MacIntyre, 1999; Spielmann and Radnofsky, 2001; and Rodríguez and Abreu, 2003). Language researchers and theorists are conscious of the association between anxiety and language learning and research has shown that language learners may experience anxiety in language classes (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). A case in point is the study done by Price (1991) who interviewed highly anxious students to get their perspectives on anxiety experienced in language classes. The students associated the following factors as the causes of language anxiety: the level of difficulty of foreign language classes; the poor results they obtained in language classes compared to other classes; and the stressful classroom experiences while learning a language. In relation to classroom sources of anxiety, the students expressed the following: fears of being laughed at by their peers or making a fool of themselves; the concern about making errors in pronunciation; the frustration of not being able to communicate effectively; and the difficulty of language classes compared to other classes. In addition, some students claimed that they worked harder in their language classes compared to other classes but they still did not do well. This indicates that language courses may be more demanding and more difficult than other courses or may be placing special demands on learners.



## **What is Language Anxiety?**

The anxiety phenomenon can be explained by first understanding the concept of anxiety arousal. Anxiety arousal is associated with “self-related cognition: thoughts of failure, worry over how one is performing in the situation, and self-deprecating thoughts” (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 35). An example of self-deprecating thought is negative self-evaluation such as “I am a slow learner”.

In order to understand language anxiety, the definitions of anxiety have to be examined. Since anxiety is an abstract psychological phenomenon, researchers have not been able to agree on one definition of anxiety (MacIntyre, 1999). However, the most cited definitions for anxiety in language learning are the ones given by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), and MacIntyre (1999). A definition on language anxiety with respect to foreign language anxiety has been proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986, p. 128) as a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning”. Another definition of language anxiety is stated by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994, p. 284) as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning”. Then, MacIntyre (1999, p. 27) refines his definition of language anxiety as “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language”.

Based on these definitions of language anxiety, the following descriptions of the differences between anxious language learners and non-anxious language learners can help us understand the experiences of the two types of learner. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991c, p. 112) characterize an anxious language learner as “an individual who perceives the second language as an uncomfortable experience, who withdraws from voluntary participation, who feels social pressures not to make mistakes, and who is less willing to try uncertain or novel linguistic forms”. On the other hand, a non-anxious language learner is usually a person who feels relaxed and comfortable in the language learning class.

The differences in performance between anxious language learners and non-anxious language learners can be found in studies by Steinberg and Horwitz (1986), and MacIntyre, Noels and Clément (1997). Steinberg and Horwitz’s (1986) study showed that anxious language learners described visual stimuli less interpretively compared to the non-anxious language learners who could describe the visual stimuli interpretively. Similarly, MacIntyre, Noels and Clément’s (1997) study on learners’ self-perceptions of their competence on language tasks and language anxiety indicated that anxious learners tended to underestimate their competence, thereby potentially impairing progress, compared to the less anxious learners who tended to overestimate their competence which could facilitate language learning.

## **The Role of Anxiety in Language Learning**

It is crucial to understand the role of anxiety in language learning because it ranks high among factors that can influence language learning, regardless of whether the setting is formal or informal (Oxford, 1999a). According to MacIntyre (1995), language anxiety plays a significant causal role in creating individual differences in both language learning and communication. In a second language class, anxiety can be manifested or experienced at different levels. While it can be harmful, anxiety in itself may not necessarily have a negative effect on language. The benefits of moderate levels of anxiety should not be ignored as it can provide an impetus to performing a task or achieving an objective. The following quotation given by McLellan provides a clear picture of the different levels of anxiety and their potential effects on a learning task:

Anxiety is usually a warning that alerts a person to the fact that something is wrong and prepares him or her to face the anxiety-producing situation. A lack of anxiety may result in an “I-don’t-care” attitude that, in fact, may increase the potential for failure. Moderate levels of anxiety, however, are beneficial. They supply motivation and added energy and increase one’s ability to focus on the task at hand. On the other hand, too much anxiety can be damaging, causing “hyped-up” and jittery feelings so intense that effective use of energies towards achieving a goal becomes impossible.  
(1986, p. 40)

The different roles that anxiety can play in language learning have led some researchers to classify anxiety into various categories. Alpert and Haber (1960), for example, classify anxiety into two types: harmful or debilitating anxiety and



helpful or facilitating anxiety. According to Oxford (1999a), most researchers regard anxiety as debilitating because anxiety harms learners' performance. For example, anxious learners may have problem comprehending materials because of the short-term memory loss due to anxiety. They may also have a problem in producing what they have learnt because anxiety interferes with the long-term memory retrieval process (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b).

Research on language anxiety has produced findings associated with debilitating anxiety as well as facilitating anxiety. For example, Cohen and Norst (1989) cited the painful experiences faced by their adult students (such as the fear of having their inadequacies exposed) when they were learning a foreign language. On the other hand, some researchers such as Kleinmann (1977) discovered a positive relationship between facilitating anxiety levels and the use of generally avoided structures. Similarly, Bailey's (1983) diary study revealed the driving influence of facilitating anxiety when she increased her efforts to master the French language and also when she worked hard to out-do other students.

Besides researchers, language teachers are also concerned about anxiety in language learning as they must address their students' anxiety. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), language teachers should consider the possibility of debilitating anxiety causing a student's poor performance instead of attributing the student's poor performance to factors such as a lack of ability, inadequate background, or poor motivation. It has also been found that extremely

