

Hybrid Learning: A Qualitative Study of Learners’ Anxiety in Language Classrooms

Dr. Apirat Akaraphattanawong¹, Dr. Hambalee Jehma²

¹ Department of International Language Teaching, Faculty of Education, Silpakorn University

² Prince of Songkla University International College Hatyai Campus, Prince of Songkla University

Abstract: *This qualitative study aims to investigate the sources of foreign language anxiety among undergraduate students participating in hybrid learning classrooms. The primary objective of this study was to identify factors that may cause foreign language classroom anxiety, and factors that may reduce anxiety, to better understand the impact that anxiety may have on learning English as a foreign language. The sample groups in the study were purposively selected from the students studying English as a compulsory subject at a Thai university. To collect the data, semi-structured interviews were employed. The data was qualitatively analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that the psycholinguistic and socio-cultural aspects of language learning and communication may induce English language anxiety among EFL students in the language classroom. The findings also point to the necessity of English language teachers identifying and understanding these anxiety-provoking causes in order to create an anxiety-free learning environment that helps students make progress in their English development.*

Keywords: *English language, foreign language classroom anxiety, hybrid learning, undergraduate students*

1. Introduction

Previous research has investigated Language Anxiety in relation to a range of topics that are important to this study. Using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scales (FLCAS), The research has looked into the connection between general and situation-specific anxiety [1], [2]. The studies indicated that foreign language classroom anxiety was different between reading and non-reading classrooms. In other studies, [3] the researcher investigated Chinese students who learn English as a second language to see the reasons why they were unwilling to communicate and appeared anxious. According to the findings, most of the students showed a sign of anxiety, poor grades, and concerns in public speaking when they were in English classes. Moreover, [2] also discovered an obstructive relationship between the FLCAS and grade level in second language classrooms like French and Spanish. Similarly, [4] found a mildly unfavourable connection linked with Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and course grades among college students studying Japanese. [5] in the same way, found Test Anxiety affects students’ grades in many foreign language programs including German, Spanish, and French which was similarly to [6] who also investigated the possibility of students' avoidance of various English constructs. His findings suggested that among native Arabic speakers, the usage of passive structures greatly reduced anxiety.

However, teaching and learning nowadays has been changed from normal face to face classroom into the online ones which the spread of online learning in every subject. Teaching nowadays has been changed from normal face to face learning into online teaching in every subject, including English classes. According to the

study of [7], it stated that English language digital resources in the future will be implemented for learning to benefit the learning strategies of non-native speakers of English. Also, [8] conducted a study on perceptions on language learning in a technological environment, and concluded that the teacher plays a vital role in online learning. This is in line with the study of [9] which identifies that the role of the teacher is crucial in an online learning and the instructional skills can be also developed. This phenomenon has brought the ideas of having both face-to-face classes together with the online ones as a hybrid teaching and learning pedagogy with the idea that the hybrid learning can be a solution for this since it combines innovation and technological advances in online learning with interaction and participation from conventional or face-to-face learning models [9], meaning that it is a learning model integrating innovation and technological progress through online learning systems with the same interaction and participation from traditional learning models [10]. Hybrid learning method is, therefore, a combination of face-to-face instructional methods with online learning processes.

In terms of the anxiety arising from the classes that applied the mentioned pedagogy, there was a study showing that Chinese students with distinct competence levels who face anxiety utilized personal records or reflective journals, in-class observations, and one-on-one interviews [11]. The significant number of students from different levels all experience anxiety when they must join conversational activities in face-to-face class or online classes. The study also demonstrated that kids who were more adept were less anxious. Surprisingly, when students were required to respond to the teacher, they experienced the highest anxiety. Meanwhile, when they're working in pairs, they're the least nervous. Students have been less concerned about utilizing English in verbal communication as they gain more exposure to oral English online. In Thailand, there has been a wide range of studies on Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scales (FLCAS). Most research about anxiety has focused on establishing a link between two learner characteristics. For example, [2] has investigated how English classroom anxiety affects first-year students' English achievement. A Thai version of the FLCAS was used to conduct the survey. Regardless of the areas of student's study, the data show that the FLCAS poorly affects their performance in a mandatory English foundation course. Furthermore, the Believe about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) and an English language achievement test were used by [12] to investigate whether beliefs, anxiety and achievement in the English learning classroom share common effects among school students. The study resulted in showing a relationship between language learning attitudes, Language Anxiety, and language learning achievement.

In addition, FLCA may affect differently when the learning process and advantage and harmful achievement are considered. Some research conveys that FLCA has a positive impact on language learning. [13] revealed their study findings that students who were less exposed to FLCA can get a higher score than those who were more exposed to it. Some research also asserted that FLCA had an impact on language learning positively. [14] pointed out that anxiety can both boost people's performance and divert people's focus away from the task, resulting in poor performance. Brown's (2008) study also investigated that student who learn the English language and experience with FLCA get an IELTS 6 competency level as a result. Many studies have discovered links between language speaking anxiety and L2 proficiency levels. For example, [11] discovered that as language level increased, the amount of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety decreased. In addition, it has been claimed that anxiety benefits language learners in some respects, such as keeping them attentive. Therefore, a high level of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety cannot only cause negative effects but can also cause positive effects [11]. From the studies mentioned above, there is no obvious agreement on which states, circumstances, or events have the effects where FLCA both promote and inhibit effects on learning [15] especially in the context of Thai EFL learners' FLCA in hybrid language learning contexts. To explore the insight of how such context the FLCA of the Thai EFL learners to explore the effects of the context of the FLCA on Thai EFL learners, this qualitative research design was employed.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Participants

The forty undergraduates participating in this study were the students studying the university's compulsory English course at a university in Thailand. There were 17 males and 23 females studying in two different majors. They all have been studying English since they were at the primary and high school levels as compulsory subjects and thus following the Thai education system requirement. All of them have passed the similar minimum English requirement admission examination for getting to the university.

. Student semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven highly anxious graduate students who were randomly selected. The interview aimed to explore the causes of English language classroom anxiety that the participants experienced, and to capture data that is not directly observable. The questions used during the interview on the participants' English language anxiety in the study were adapted from [16] study. The interviews took about 8-15 minutes and were conducted in the participants' mother tongue, Thai, to facilitate communication and to promote richness of response and access to data in a less threatening medium. Some questions were reworded when interviewees did not understand the questions exactly. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using thematic analysis [17]. Thematic analysis was chosen as a method of discourse extraction from the data because it provides a way of looking for patterns in the data and connecting them together into meaningful groups and themes that capture the subject being investigated.

3. Findings and Discussion

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 undergraduate students who were randomly selected. The questions used during the interview were adapted from [16] study. The interview sought to explore the sources of the participants' English language classroom anxiety. It took about 8-15 minutes. The interviews were transcribed, and the results were analysed using Thematic Analysis method [17]. Thematic analysis was chosen as a method of extracting discourse from the data because it allows for the identification of patterns in the data and the formation of meaningful groupings and themes that capture the issue under investigation. The researchers analysed the data by reading and rereading the data multiple times and looking for common themes and categorising them across the text, whether similar or contrasting. The codes were then organised into related clusters to form major themes. Table 1 provides the 19 codes the researchers generated from the data which indicate the anxiety-provoking causes among the participants. As indicated in the table, there were 19 possible causes of English language anxiety among the participants, according to the findings. This analysis gave the opportunity to uncover new themes by considering all the rich and varied information obtained from the interviews.

TABLE 1: Outline of Coding Scheme

| Code Labels | Descriptions | Total Times Referred |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Inadequate grammatical knowledge | Errors frequently appearing in their sentence construction when they speak and write in English. | 6 |
| 2. Fear of being the focus of attention | Feeling anxious or uncomfortable in situations where one is likely to be the centre of attention — e.g., performing or speaking publicly. | 6 |
| 3. Limited vocabulary knowledge | Overuse of lower-level vocabulary and failure to acquire more advanced-level vocabulary, as well as limited awareness of collocational usage. | 5 |
| 4. Fear of making mistakes | Feeling embarrassed, anxious and humiliated when making mistakes in front of friends and teachers. | 5 |
| 5. Low English proficiency | Not fluent in the English language, often because it is not their native language. | 5 |

| Code Labels | Descriptions | Total Times Referred |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 6. Inability to express oneself | Inability to use English to adequately express mature thoughts and ideas. | 4 |
| 7. Fear of negative evaluation | Apprehension about others' evaluations, distress over negative evaluations by others, and the expectation that others would evaluate one negatively. | 3 |
| 8. Attitude to EFL Learning | A feeling or opinion that influences one to learn or not to learn English language in the required manner. | 3 |
| 9. Lack of confidence | Spending more time thinking and worrying about what other people are doing than focusing on self-competence and potential. | 3 |
| 10. Poor/bad pronunciation | Utterances that cannot be comprehensible to listeners. | 3 |
| 11. Fear of being laughed at | A disproportionate fear of being laughed at by others | 3 |
| 12. Perception of peer | A feeling that peers do better than oneself in a foreign language class | 2 |
| 13. Teacher-related | Related to instructional practices, teacher behaviours, instructor-learner interactions, and classroom procedures. | 2 |
| 14. Fear of failing tests | A significant amount of stress related to preparing for and taking an examination | 2 |
| 15. Losing face | Apprehension about English production and understanding in a range of settings that might cause one to lose social prestige and reputation. | 2 |
| 16. Personality-related | Being reluctant to speak, not speaking, speaking seldom, or when speaking, speaking with difficulty. | 1 |
| 17. Lack of practice | Not having enough opportunities to use the language outside the classroom. | 1 |
| 18. Computer Literacy | Student's lack of computer literacy, technological proficiency | 1 |
| 19. Situational | The learning situation including formal and informal learning contexts | 1 |

The 19 codes were then examined as some of them clearly fitted together into a theme. The coded data was reviewed to identify significant broader patterns of meaning (potential themes). Consequently, the 19 codes were aggregated into two themes (i.e., cognitive, and linguistic, and socio-cultural). The themes were about the aspects of causes attributed to English language classroom anxiety.

3.1. Anxiety provoking causes related to psycholinguistic aspect

The causes categorised under this theme are connected to the psycholinguistics component of language acquisition and usage. The psychological or cognitive process of acquiring and utilising a language, after all, is referred to as the psycholinguistic aspect. It examines the mechanisms occurring in the brain during the production and perception of language and the relationship between the human brain and language. Psycholinguistics is divided into three areas: language production, language perception, and language acquisition [13]. The processes involved in developing and expressing meaning through language are referred to as language production. The mechanisms involved in interpreting and understanding both written and spoken language are referred to as language perception. Language acquisition refers to the processes of learning the first or second language.

Students' perceptions of the language learning process, their perceptions of themselves and how they should act in every communicative classroom activity, and the linguistic barriers they experience in displaying their intended performance in English have all been related to language anxiety. This theme addresses the findings on some of the cognitive and psychological, and linguistic variables that may contribute to English language anxiety in the participants. Those anxiety provoking causes can be listed as inadequate grammatical knowledge, limited vocabulary knowledge, low English proficiency, inability to express oneself, attitude to EFL learning, poor/bad pronunciation, failing tests, and lack of practice. Since some of the sessions were delivered online, computer literacy was found to be one of the factors causing the anxiety among students having little experience with the online learning application, or lack of computer knowledge.

Among those listed above, inadequate grammatical knowledge was by far the most significant and frequent cause of anxiety. In other words, it appeared as though the participants were suffering language anxiety due to not having enough grammatical knowledge as seen in the following excerpt:

(S#5) "...When I speak English outside the classroom, I don't pay so much attention to grammar and feel more relaxed, but here in class it's different, I don't dare to do the same, because I'm afraid that everybody will hear I said something grammatically wrong..."

(S#1) "...I feel anxious because I don't have enough vocabulary and grammar. I think if I knew more grammar or vocabulary or how to make a correct sentence, I wouldn't be nervous..."

(S#3) "...I always have to think it over what I want to say before saying it, and concentrate hard on making sentences grammatically correct or making use of words as accurate as possible..."

The students' responses concerning limited vocabulary knowledge were reported as the third highest cause. It was found that students associated English language anxiety with lack of vocabulary knowledge. Also, that their anxiety might arise when encountering unfamiliar words, as one participant says:

(S#3) "...I don't like reading in front of class, especially when I encounter difficult or unknown words, or technical terms..."

Having low English proficiency might be the other major cause of English language classroom anxiety among the students. Some of the participants felt anxious because they thought their English was not good enough. (S#3) stated:

"...I enjoy speaking English in class and sharing the answers asked in the class but sometimes I feel nervous because I don't understand the question. I also think that it's due to my English that is not good enough. That's why I think speaking English in class is frightening..."

3.2. Anxiety provoking causes related to socio-cultural aspect

The social environment in which students find themselves, their cultures, social status, personal experience, and perceptions of the English language, especially when speaking a language other than their mother tongue, and even their ages have all been connected to English language anxiety. Sociolinguistics, according to [4], is involved with language in social and cultural contexts, particularly how individuals with diverse social identities (e.g., gender, age, race, ethnicity, class) communicate and how their speech changes in different situations. Some of the issues addressed include how dialect features (such as word pronunciation, word choice, and word patterns) cluster together to form personal styles of speech; and why people from different communities or cultures can misunderstand what is meant, said, and done due to differences in how they use language. Sociolinguistics spans a wide range of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Language anxiety stems primarily from the social and communicative aspects of language learning and can thus be classified as a social anxiety. [6], as referenced in [2] Some participants even suggested that social variables are more significant than

cognitive and linguistic variables in causing language anxiety. This theme covers various socio-cultural aspects that may help explain why the students experienced the anxiety.

Fear of being the focus of attention, fear of making a mistake, and fear of negative evaluation, lack of confidence, fear of being laughed at, perception of peers, teacher-related factors, losing face, and situation-related reasons are among the anxiety-inducing factors discussed in the theme. Many participants reported feeling anxious or uneasy in situations where they are likely to be the focus of attention, according to the findings (e.g., performing or speaking publicly, or in front of the class). This anxiety-inducing cause was reported as the highest cause which is reported in the excerpts below:

(S#4) *“...I need a lot of time to practice my presentation. But you know, when I stood up in front of my classmates, I forgot everything HAHA. I was very nervous actually, I felt my heartbeat so fast, I was so shocked and embarrassed when many people stared at me. So, every time I prepare my notes, read from it and tried to finish the presentation...”*

(S#5) *“...I tend to say nothing even if I know I would be able to answer. I know I could speak about simple things or some topic, I've got the sentences in my mind, but when the teacher asked for a volunteer, I just can't. I don't want to be in the spotlight or center of attention. Also, I'm sometimes not 100% sure about my answers...”*

(S#6) *“...What I'm most nervous about is being called on by the teacher and having to say something while everyone is waiting to hear from me; this is what makes me feel uneasy. I don't want people to question why I can't speak English even I have good education or good qualification...”*

Whilst some participants admitted that their English language anxiety was attributed to fear of making mistake which was the fourth highest cause. This could be reflected in the conversation excerpt below:

Interviewer: *“[...] What are examples of situations that cause stress or anxiety for you?”*

(S#3): *“Personally, I think that it's impromptu speaking tests or interviews. The first reason is about my grammar, so I can't form correct sentences, the second reason is that I'm afraid of making mistakes or saying anything badly because I don't know what to say. It's like my brain is temporarily blank. I don't want my classmates or teachers to laugh at me or get very bad scores...”*

Similarly, **S#6** reported:

“...I worry about not being able to say what I want correctly. The bad thing is that I always have to be very careful not to make mistakes...”

4. Conclusion

In brief, the semi-structured interview revealed qualitative findings related to the psycholinguistics, and socio-cultural aspects of language learning and communication that may induce English language anxiety among EFL students in the language classroom environment. The psycholinguistic factors of learners' cognition and language learning problems were explored in this part under several codes, e.g., inadequate grammatical knowledge, limited vocabulary knowledge, low English proficiency, poor/bad pronunciation, etc. The socio-cultural causes, which refer to learners' social context, culture, social status, etc., were also discussed under codes, e.g., fear of being the focus of attention, fear of making mistakes, fear of being laughed at, etc. The findings point to the necessity of English language teachers identifying and understanding these anxiety provoking causes to create an anxiety-free learning environment which helps students make progress in their English development. In addition, most of the findings related to these two aspects seem to corroborate the existing literature on foreign language anxiety.

Regarding the psycholinguistics aspect, grammar and vocabulary have been found to be the most important causes that make graduate students feel uneasy in learning to speak English. Grammar has long been a source of

contention among theorists and practitioners alike, particularly in the Thai education system, where where many believe that teaching grammar prevents Thai English learners from speaking successfully. Thai students, particularly undergraduate students, tend to prioritise memorization of vocabulary, phrases, grammatical rules, and sentence structure. Overall, these findings are consistent with those reported by [11], who investigated the causes of anxiety among EFL language learners during English language lessons. He stated that the causes were a lack of language understanding and making grammatical mistakes. Interestingly, the results revealed that many participants feel anxious or uncomfortable in situations where they are likely to be the centre of attention (e.g., performing or speaking publicly, or in front of the class). Their anxiety came from fear of being the focus of attention especially when being asked to be a volunteer and giving an oral presentation. The participants were afraid of showing themselves up or being spotlighted in front of others, especially when they were asked to speak in a foreign language. Also, they experienced anxiety because they knew that their performances were being monitored by people in the classroom. This feeling can lead them to be anxious because they are under pressure about the evaluation they will receive.

As online and distance language learning have been widely used around the world since the pandemic, the use of new instructional technologies is a source of anxiety for some online language learners. It is advised that students' digital literacy is surveyed and analysed at the beginning of the course. Teachers are also encouraged to meet learners' language learning needs through online learning, as learners who are new to online or distance learning are more likely to require more teacher support to help reduce learners' perceived levels of foreign language anxiety.

5. References

- [1] S. Matsuda and P. Gobel, "Anxiety and predictors of performance in the foreign language classroom," *System*, vol. 32.1, pp. 21-36, 2004.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2003.08.002>
- [2] K. Horwitz, "Preliminary evidence for the reliability and validity of a foreign language anxiety scale," *Tesol Quarterly*, vol. 20.3, pp. 559-562, 1986.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3586302>
- [3] M. Liu and J. Jackson, "An exploration of Chinese EFL learners' unwillingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety," *The modern language journal*, vol. 92.1, pp. 71-86, 2008.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2008.00687.x>
- [4] Y. Aida, "Examination of Horwitz, and Cope's construct of foreign language anxiety: the case of students of Japanese," *The modern language journal*, vol. 78.2, pp. 155-168, 1994.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1994.tb02026.x>
- [5] K. Chastain, "Affective and ability factors in second language acquisition," *Language learning*, vol. 25.1, pp. 153-161, 1975.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1975.tb00115.x>
- [6] H. Kleinmann, "Avoidance behavior in adult second language acquisition1," *Language learning*, vol. 27.1, pp. 93-107, 1977.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1977.tb00294.x>
- [7] C. Meurant, "The iPad aand EFL digital literacy," *Signal processing and multimedia*, pp. 224-234, 2010.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-17641-8_27
- [8] J. Stepp-Greany, "Student perceptions on language learning in a technological environment: implications for the new mellenium," *Language learning & technology*, vol. 6.1, pp. 165-180, 2002.

- [9] H. Hendrayati and B. Pamungkas, "Implementasi model hybrid learning pada proses pembelajaran mata kuliah statistika ii di prodi manajemen Fpep Upi," *Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan*, vol. 13.2, 2013.
<https://doi.org/10.17509/jpp.v13i2.3430>
- [10] K. Thorne, *Blended Learning: How to Integrate Online & Traditional Learning*, Kogan Page Publishers, 2003.
- [11] Y. Liu, "Word of mouth for movies: its dynamics and impact on box office revenue," *Journal of marketing*, vol. 70.3, pp. 74-89, 2006.
<https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.70.3.74>
- [12] J. Young, "Creating a low anxiety classroom environment: what does language anxiety research suggest?" *The modern language journal*, vol. 75.4, pp. 426-439, 1991.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1991.tb05378.x>
- [13] L. Sparks and L. Ganschow, "Is the foreign language classroom anxiety scale measuring anxiety or language skills?" *Foreign Language Annals*, vol. 40.2, pp. 260-287, 2007.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2007.tb03201.x>
- [14] C. Li and L. Wei, "Anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom in language learning amongst junior secondary students in rural China: how do they contribute to L2 achievement?" *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, pp. 1-16, 2022.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263122000031>
- [15] L. Sparks and A. Alamer, "Long-term impacts of L1 language skills on L2 anxiety: the mediating role of language aptitude and L2 achievement," *Language Teaching Research*, 2022.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688221104392>
- [16] M. Tanver, *Investigation of the Factors that Cause Language Anxiety for ESL/EFL Learners in Learning Speaking Skills and the Influence It Casts on Communication in the Target Language*, University of Glasgow, Scotland, 2007.
- [17] V. Braun and V. Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative research in psychology*, vol. 3.2, pp. 77-101, 2006.
<https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>