Anxiety in EFL Kuwait: A Case Study of Secondary School Students

Mr. Ahmad Ali Sahiouni

English Language Instructor - Kuwait International Law School, State of Kuwait
ahmad75ali2@yahoo.com

Abstract

The current paper focuses on anxiety in an EFL situation of public schools of Kuwait. The sample consisted of 180 students (88 girls and 92 boys). Depending on students' level of anxiety – on the overall score in Language Anxiety Score – the researcher classified the students into three categories: Highest Level of Anxiety (HLA) scored as high as 14.1%; the Moderate Level of Anxiety students was 17.5%; while the Lowest Level of Anxiety studentsreached 68.4%. Students' responses to a questionnaire on learning English revealed that theHighest Level of Anxietystudents were more unlikely to exert extra efforts to enhance their language proficiency compared with the Lowest Level of Anxiety students.

Key words: anxiety, Highest Level of Anxiety, Lowest Level of Anxiety, English language teaching

1. Introduction

Since the learner is an individual with special needs and requirements, it is highly crucial to consider the psychological aspect of learning. This aspect is about forty years old as many researchers in the 1980s focused on the significance of attention in second language acquisition.Therefore, many language experts understood the linguistic dimension differently. For example, Stevick (1980, P16) believes that language learning success "depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom". Stern (1983, P 52), on the other hand, says that "the effective component contributes at least as much and often more to language learning than the cognitive skills". Oxford (1994) highlightsthat second language research should focus on both the intellectual and social and effective characteristics of the learning process. He holds that belief because language learners are human beings not cognitive or metacognitive machines. On the other hand, other factors, such as social and psychological, are tackled by Ehrman and Dornyei (1998). They argue that the relationship between teachers and learners, and learners and other learners on one hand, and the conscious and unconscious psychological processes play a vital role in the learning process. Other scholars, however, such as Skehan (1989) and Bernat (2006) strongly believe that social and affective variables are influential in the language learning process. The effective aspects of anxiety, motivation, self-regulation, and self-efficacy have received extraordinary consideration in the psychological processes (Ushioda, 1996; Dickenson, 1995; and Ehrman, 2000).

In Kuwait, not too many research studies are available on English language teaching and learning. In addition, there is severe shortage of classroom interaction from students' point of view, leading to one form or another of anxiety. The current research paper focuses on students' self-reports

pertaining language learning and aims at presenting fruitful insights into the psychological domain of English learning. The findings may help English language teachers to understand both students' learning behavior and the obstacles they encounter in the learning process.

2. Review of Literature

Language anxiety affects L2 learning, pointing to the mutuality between anxiety and proficiency (Horwitz, Horwitz& Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Spielberger (1972, P34) believes that anxiety is a 'transitory emotional state or condition characterized by feelings of tension and apprehension and heightened autonomic nervous system activity.' Such a state is double edged as it can motivate and facilitate as well as disturb and restrain cognitive actions such as learning. Language anxiety is an emotional condition in which a learner might have "subjective feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (Horwitz et al., 1986, P 127). Moreover, Horwitz et al categorized three forms of anxieties: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. When learners are under excessive self-evaluation, concern of possible failure, or opinion of others, they experience a form of high anxiety represented in distraction or self-related cognition. Once impeded with such worries, learners encounter difficulties in performance via cognitive interference in performing certain tasks. Hence, foreign language learning is a psychologically effective process for students with language anxiety. According to Campbell and Ortiz (1991), fifty percent of language learners experience a form of incapacitating rates of language anxiety. Moreover, a study on writing anxiety involvingfuture English language teachers in Turkey supports this idea (Atay and Kurt, 2006). On the other hand, many scholars Brown (2000), Dornyei (2005)), Mercer, S. (2015), Rita Jonson (2016), Ellis (1994), Cheng, Horwitz &Schallert (1999) and Horwitz (2001), referred to anxiety as one of the influential aspects which plays an important role in L2 acquisition, and performance.

Language anxiety is a universal occurrence, and an essential emotional concept among L2 learners. Bernhardt and Kamil (1995) generated the Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis, which suggested that a level of second language linguistic ability must be obtained in order to achieve efficiency in the development of a second language. Anxiety is believed to be a significant factor in language learning (Deci& Ryan, 1985; Ely, 1986; Oxford &Shearin, 1996; Noels, Pelletier, Clement &Vallerand, 2000; Brown, 2000; and Schumann, 2001). Anxiety negatively affects students' motivation to learn (Geen, 1994, P48). Anxiety plays an important role in interrupting behavior, concentrating on the erroneous actions, making people look for alternative action. In addition, anxiety affects learners' motivation and related learning behavior. Language learners not affected by anxiety tend to be more confident to participate in language learning activities compared with those plagued by anxiety. For example, language learners lacking confidence or even panicking to speak loudly in class are more likely to be unable to develop oral skills. According to many scholars, such as Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1994), less anxious L2 learners aremore motivated. Learners, who enjoy previous experiences, are capable to appreciate their own proficiency, and find the learning process easy. This current research paper aims at investigating high language anxiety (HLA) and Lowe language anxiety (LLA) students' endeavors to enhance English language proficiency. Moreover, the research paper aims to explore the insights of how English language learners feel in English classes and reasons for such feeling.

In the North American continent, Pappamihiel (2002) conducted a study on language anxiety among 178 middle-school Mexican immigrant students attending school in the US. The English Language Anxiety Scale was applied on the sample students to investigate the relationship between levels of anxiety and certain factors influencing the students, including the duration of their presence in

the US, academic achievement, four language skills, and gender. Findings revealed that interaction with Mexican students contributed to raising the level of anxiety and avoidance was used to reduce anxiety levels. Na's study (2007) in China supports Pappamihiel's research. Na surveyed some 115 students who showed high level of anxiety in English language learning. The findings revealed higher level of anxiety among male students on one hand, and such high anxiety plays a negative role in high school students. Moreover, Na (2007) concluded that his form of anxiety made learners "flee" from the learning process to avoid any more anxiety. Furthermore, Ohata (2005) investigated the level of anxiety in Japanese students learning English in the US.Based on the self-reflective accounts of the emotional difficulties experienced by these students, Ohata concluded that the features of language anxiety resulted from Japanese cultural influence. It appears that Japanese cultural practices at home are reflected in students' reluctance to express one's ideas, leading to the feeling of anxiety while interacting with others. However, in a broader study in four universities in Japan, Williams and Andrade (2008) found that anxiety in language learning was related to the output and processing stages of the language learning process. In addition, the researchers found that students ascribed their anxieties to teachers and other students.

However, the findings of theprevious studies mentioned earlier are in favourof the objectives of the current study. The objectives are represented in students' obvious anxiety prior to language exams. Besides, students' different levels of anxiety meet with the findings of the current study in the sense that not all students suffer from the same level of anxiety. Hence, the researchers are motivated to explore the mechanism of such anxiety and examined its roots and consequences. Students' attempts to develop their performance were also tackled in the current research paper. The researchers explored the English language anxiety levels of Form 4 students (Form 4 Students are the students who are stressed during preparation time for exams. The stress might affect students' mental capabilities, leading to obstacles in the learning process).

3. Research Objectives

This research paper aims at investigating anxiety in the English language learning process in high school students in the State of Kuwait. Hence, the main objectives of this research paper include:

1. Examining the English language anxiety levels of Form 4 students
2. Examining how students of Highest Level of Anxiety (HLA) andstudents of Lowest Level of Anxiety(LLA) Form 4 students develop English language proficiency
3. Applying insights into the mechanism of HLA and LLA Form 4 students' feeling while learning English and the reason for such feeling
4. Investigating students' exerted efforts to enhance their English language proficiency

5. Research Questions

The research paper raises the following questions:

1. What is the extent of English language anxiety for Form 4 students?
2. How can HLA students and LLA students Form 4 students develop their English language proficiency?
3. How do HLA students and LLA students of Form 4 students feel during the English learning process and why do they feel that way?
4. What do the students do to improve their English?

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Sample

The sample students are 187 (99 males, 88 females) Form 4 students from Asima Educational Zone, in the State of Kuwait. The age of the selected students ranges between 17 and 18 years (mean age is 17.95 years, SD = .40). They are all Arabic native speakers. They have been studying English in the public schools for twelve years (starting from Grade 1, and some started learning English from UKG but this is not taken into account). The average English language proficiency level ranges between intermediate to upper intermediate. The level of proficiency was based on students' scores assessed by their teachers.

5.2 Instruments

Language Anxiety Scale

To measure the anxiety level, the researcher adopted the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale derived from Language Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986). The 32-item scale was built in both English and Arabic for the purpose of facilitating students' understanding of the items. On the 4-point scale, students were asked to express to what extent they agree with each statement. To verify uniformity of both versions of the instrument, the three-step back translation method was adopted (Brislin, 1986). The scale was piloted on a sample of 31 students who were not included in the sample study. To validate the suitability of the scale, two experienced secondary school teachers inspected them before implementing the scale on the students. Teachers' comments were considered and some items were removed from the scale; while others were modified. However, item-total correlations ranged from .53 to .84, the test-retest stability was .90, $p < .01$, and the Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient was .93. The Alpha reliability coefficient for the actual sample ($N = 177$) was .91. These results reflect the high reliability of the Language Scale Anxiety in measuring language anxiety.

Questionnaire

The students were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire to measure their reflections on the process of English language learning. The questionnaire items focused on the following aspects: (i) the frequency students use the language skills, i.e. how often they use listening, speaking, reading and writing, (ii) the actual steps students take to develop their language skills, (iii) students' feeling in English classes and the reasons for having such feeling. However, the questionnaire was translated into Arabic and the three-step back translation procedure was implemented to verify the equivalence of the two versions of the questions (Brislin, 1986). Students could answer the questionnaire either in English or Arabic since the questionnaire is designed to explore students' views about learning English rather than their English language proficiency. Then, the questionnaire was piloted and some questions were amended after discussing the clarity of the questions with the sample students (See Appendix).

5.3 Procedure

Language Anxiety Scale

The majority of the students managed to complete the scale in less than twenty minutes. The students were gathered in the school theatre and the test was distributed. The exam time took half an hour. All students managed to finish it within time limit.

Questionnaire on Learning English

The questionnaire was administered to the students after they completed the Language Anxiety Scale. Students completed the questionnaire in less than twenty minutes. Some answered in English, while others responded in Arabic.

6. Data analysis

Language Anxiety Scale

The test was marked, and students' scores were summed up in the scale to produce the Language Anxiety level. This process is done by reversing scoring for the items in the scale. In other words, those scored highest considered the lowest in anxiety and vice versa.

Questionnaire on English Language Learning

About 80% ($n = 40$) of the English Learning Questionnaire items were on the content analysis, including 20 scripts of HLA (highest language anxiety) and another 20 scripts LLA (lowest language anxiety). The 'framework' technique of qualitative data was applied to analyze the content (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). This is a comprehensive and systematic method for content analysis. Procedures involved in this concern include: (1) familiarization with the data via initial reading, (2) a second reading of the scripts to identify recurring themes or categories, (3) coding data into themes or categories, (4) categorization, (5) reduction of categories by grouping them when necessary, and (6) recoding responses by the refined framework of categories. To verify consistency of coding students' reflections, the researchers blindly coded them within two weeks after the study (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994, P187).To determine the agreement level of both codings, Cohen's (1988) kappa value was computed, which is an index of intercoder reliability correcting the chance agreement. The *k* value attained was .83, demonstrating high consistency in coding.

7. Findings and Discussion

Extent of Language Anxiety of Students

The purpose of this research is to examine the degree of language anxiety of Form 4 students in the Kuwaiti high school students. Students' language anxiety score was achieved via summing up their scores in the Language Anxiety Scale after completing the reverse coding ofthe items of the scale. Based on anxiety scale adopted by the researcher, scores were categorized into three levels of anxiety; namely, lowest language anxiety (LLA), moderate language anxiety (MLA), and Highest language anxiety (HLA). Students scoring higher than one standard deviation under the mean (mean -36.23, *SD* = 8.81) were classified in the low language anxiety category. Students scoring within the range of one

standard deviation below and another one above the mean were classified in moderate language anxiety category. Students scoring one standard deviation above the mean were classified in the highest language anxiety category. Table 1 showsthat 17.5% of the students were in the LLA category, 68.4% in the MLA category; while 14.1% were in the HLA category.

Table 1:
Students' distribution according to level of languageanxiety

Anxiety Level	Range of Scores	n	Percentage
Low Anxiety Level	17 - 28	32	17.5
Moderate Anxiety Level	30 - 47	124	68.4
Highest Anxiety Level	45 - 59	24	14.1

* *n*stands for number of students
* the figures in the second column refer to the students' results to the mean of standard deviation described in the Language Anxiety Scale.
* the mean of standard deviation described in the Language Anxiety Scale is -36.23

Students' Endeavor to Develop English Language Proficiency

The second objective of this research paperis to further explore insights into how LLA students and HLA students develop English language proficiency. Students were guided by questions during expressing their reflections on their method of learning English. Based on the research plan, students' responses were content analyzed and categorized. Table 2 shows the categorized responses of two groups of students. The findings generally focus on the idea that students with LLA exerted more efforts to progress in their English language proficiency than those with HLA.According to the figures in Table 2, students with HLA more likely tended to either do nothing to improve their language, ordid not know what to do to elevate their English language proficiency.

Table 2:
Summary of responses on learning English

No.	Category of Responses	No. of Responses	
		Lowes LA (*n*=20)	HighestLA (*n*=20)
1.	*Frequency of conversing in English*		
	Between 50 % and 100% of the time	182	
	Less than 50% but higher than 20% of the time	36	
	Less than 20% of the time	215	
	Actions taken to develop the speaking skill		
	Practice with family or friends	105	
	Watch English programs/movies	42	
	Read extra materials (books, novels)/ use dictionary	72	
	Do not know how to improve	02	
	Do nothing	314	
2.	*Frequency of practicing writing*		
	Between 50 % and 100% of the time	198	
	Less than 50% but higher than 20% of the time	3	4
	Less than 20% of the time	0	11

	Actions taken to develop the writing skill		
	Practice writing articles/letters/essays	96	
	Read extra materials (books, novels)/ use dictionary	135	
	Do not know how to improve	0	3
	Do nothing	0	10
3.	*Frequency of practicing listening*		
	Listen to English programs/ movies/ songs/ news between 50 % and 100% of the time	19	18
	Listen to English programs/ movies/ songs/ news less than 50 % of the time	24	
	Actions taken to develop the listening skill		
	Listen to the radio or watch more English programs	88	
	Listen carefully with the help of subtitles	57	
	Ask for the meaning of difficult words (ask friends/family/ or use dictionary)	95	
	Do noting	24	
4.	*Frequency of practicing reading*		
	Read English materials (books/ stories/ magazines/ novels) between 50% and 100% of the time	19	10
	Read English materials less than 50% of the time	212	
	Actions taken to develop the reading skill		
	Ask for the meaning of difficult words (ask friends/family/ or teacher)	77	
	Consult dictionary or the internet for difficult words	1512	
	Do noting	0	4
5.	Students' feeling in English language classes		
	Interested/ excited / highly encouraged to learn	30	
	Happy / confident / comfortable	43	
	Normal	113	
	Bored	66	
	Confused	0	3
	Nervous / embarrassed	0	7
	Very anxious	0	4

* *Note*: LA = Language Anxiety

Findings revealed that there was a substantial difference between LLA students' and HLA students' frequency of conversing in English. According to the figures in Table 2, only two HLA students communicated in English more than 50% of the time compared with 18 out of 20 LLA students communicated in English more than 50% of the time. Students with LLA tended to exert more efforts to develop their skills in comparison with only 14 out of 20 HLA students who responded that they did nothing in this concern.

Similar figures were repeated in students' responses regarding the writing skill. About 19 students (95%) of LLA students claimed that they wrote in English more than 50% of their time; while only three (15%) of the HLA students reported that they rarely write in English. All LLA students reported

that they exerted efforts to improve their writing skill; while only ten (50%) did nothing. Only three wrote that they did not know how to improve the writing skill.

For the third language skill under study, the listening skill, about 19 LLA students (95%) and 18 (90%) of the HLA students practiced listening on a large scale. However, the LLA students and HLA students differed in their efforts to improve the listening skill. Only 9 LLA students (45%) exerted extra efforts by themselves by asking others or using the dictionary. For the HLA students, on the other hand, 7 students (35%) did more to understand what they heard by listening carefully or reading the subtitles of movies or programs or by listening for more than one time. For the students who did nothing when they heard something or they did not understand, the HLA students reported to be higher than the LLA students by three times.

The final skill being examined is the reading skill. It was noticed that the difference between LLA students and HLA students was considerable. About 19 students (95%) of the LLA students read English materials compared with less than half that number, 10 students (50%) of the HLA students. However, LLA students exerted more efforts to understand what they read. Only 4 (20%) of the HLA students reported that they did nothing to improve their reading skill.

Some findings of other researchers (Clement, Dornyei& Noel, 1994) support the findings of the current research. Moreover, the findings of this research support the effects of self-beliefs on motivation to learn (Benson, 2001; Geen, 1994; Oxford, 1992). On the other hand,the current research paper supports the findings of other researchers regarding anxiety in language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1995). Anxiety in language learning can influence learners' motivation and their learning behavior. It is not unusual that HLA students do nothing to improve language skills.

The final research question focuses on the profound vision of students' feelings during English language classes and the reasons behind such feelings

Students' responses relating to their feelings in English class reflected two main points. First, priceless insights will be available regarding the unobservable dimension of English classes. Second, students' learning behavior will be explained. According to the figures in Table 2, the majority of LLA students (16 out of 20, or 80%) expressed their interest/excitement, happiness/confidence/comfort, or at least reported normal in English classes. On the other hand, only 5 students or 20 % revealed that they felt comfortable in English classes. About 60% or 12 students of HLA students reported that they felt stressed/confused, miserable/nervous/ or even very anxious in English language classes.

Based on the previous results, it is worth trying to investigate the causes of students' feelings. Responses, given in Arabic by HLA students, were translated into English by the researchers. However, the only two LLA students, excited in English classes, reported that they felt that way because they thought they "were learning something new" or because "It is fun, interesting, and challenging".

Students' justifications for the feeling of boredom varied. For example, LLA students defended their responses by saying:

- 'Teachers talk too much'
- 'Students are not fully allowed to express their ideas or thoughts in speaking or even writing'
- 'Teachers are not fun enough. They are not creative'
- 'The book and the teaching style are boring'

The HLA students, on the other hand, justified their feeling of boredom very differently:
- 'It is almost impossible for me to understand'
- 'English is not an interesting subject'
- 'I cannot understand the teacher'
- 'The teacher talks too fast for me to follow'
- 'I do not understand and I do not know how to talk in English'

For being confused or miserable, however, HLA students responded by saying that 'teachers focus on excellent students and ignore the poor ones' and 'I am the poorest student in English'.

The HLA students classified as nervous/shy or very anxious said:

- 'I have problems with speaking fluently'
- 'I do not understand English'
- 'I am afraid if the teacher asks me and I do not understand'
- 'I cannot talk or answer in English'
- 'other students will laugh at me if I do not speak well'
- 'many words are difficult to understand'
- 'afraid that teacher asks difficult questions'

* *Note*: The researchers (Abbas Al-Shammari & Ahmad Ali Sahiouni)overlooked students' mistakes to make their reflections appropriate for the research.

The HLA students can be classified into four categories: understanding English problems, conversation problems, low self-confidence, and fear of being laughed at by others. Such responses provide a glance on the feeling of discomfort and anxiety HLA students encounter in English classes. This is the reason for the HLA students to be reluctant, self-conscious, fearful, or even panicky in English language classes. The possible reasons for such feelings can be summarized in the following points: first, the medium of instruction in Kuwaiti schools is Arabic, so that students use their native language all the time except for very limited time allocated to English language classes. Second, English language teachers are all bilingual; therefore, they tend to frequently use Arabic while teaching English.

Conclusion

The students fell into threelevels of anxiety; namely, moderate, high, and low. The majority of the students (70.4%) or two thirds was in the moderate category of anxiety; while the minority of the students (13.1%) was in the high level category. The rest of the students (18.5%) fell in the low level category. In general, the LLA students exerted extra efforts to improve their performance in the four language skills. HLA students were reported to feel anxious during English classes.

Pedagogical Implications

The current research paper triggers a number of important viable implications. Students' exerted efforts to develop their language proficiency skills need guidance. For example, some HLA students need to be instructed on how to improve the productive language skills of speaking and witting because these students claimed that they did not know to elevate their levels in such skills. Moreover, teachers have

some responsibilities as they should bestow the HLA students more chance to use those skills in a comfortable and relaxing atmosphere.

The implication of reporting not exerting any efforts to improve their language proficiency shows that both HLA students and LLA studentsbadly need to improve the four language skills. The most likely justification of HLA students not exerting efforts to improve their language proficiency is represented in the fact that they hoped to be able to improve their English by the passage of time. The feeling of helplessness should be initially tackled by the teachers before the HLA students can take the advantage from learning activities to help them elevate their English proficiency. According to Stipek (1988), learned helplessness can influence students' motivation to learn.

The responses of LLA students regarding the feeling of boredom in English classes raise the need for both making the English learning process more interesting, and creating more opportunities for the students to be more actively involved in class. On the other hand, the responses of HLA students regarding the same issue suggest that teachers should pay more attention to help such students be motivated in addition to the need for remedial activities in class.

Students' feelings during English classes suggest that English teachers have the responsibility to consider how HLA students feel and try to create a relaxing atmosphere in English classes to make the students get involved in class activities to eliminate the feeling of being shy or afraid of making mistakes. Moreover, students should exert efforts to raise students' confidence and encourage them to learn English. Teachers are responsible for giving HLA students opportunities to succeed and start their self-perception regarding English language learning. Ordaining experiences will enhance HLA students' self-percept of efficacy and improve their performance attainments (Bandura, 1993). Stress can be reduced by relaxation activities or teaching students stress management techniques (Benson et al., 2000). Among the methods of alleviating stress teachers can implement are positive avowal and encouraging words. Teachers' sympathetic and compassionate attitude towards students and efforts to understand and appreciate students' needs can leave substantial impact on students' feeling, leading to better motivation to a better learning process.

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