

## **Managing Language Learning Anxiety through Psychosocial Classroom Learning Environment**

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### **Abstract**

*Learning a language can be very interesting activity, but for some students it may be a problematic exercise. There are some factors like intelligence, motivation; attitude, classroom environment and anxiety that contribute significantly in learning English language. Classroom learning environment plays a pivotal role in teaching learning processes of a language, especially, psychosocial learning environment. Learning English is a compulsion in number of countries like Pakistan. In Pakistan English is being taught as a compulsory subject up to graduation level. Students do not feel at home in English classroom a foreign language classroom in Pakistani perspective. The present study is an attempt to explore the importance of psycho social learning environment for managing English language anxiety. The sample of the study comprised of secondary school students. For data collection two standardized scales were used. For analysis of data correlation and regression were applied. The results showed that the foreign language anxiety can be managed through creating conducive psychosocial learning, especially with teachers' support, equity, and cohesiveness among students in English language classroom at secondary level.*

**Keywords:** Learning Anxiety, Psychosocial, Learning Environment, Teacher Support, Equity, Students Cohesiveness.

## **I. Introduction**

Language is an important and most commonly used mode of communication. It is the language through which people around us become aware of our feelings, desires and interests. Moreover, language shapes thoughts and emotions of the individuals (Kilgour, 2009). Similarly, we use language to question other people to inquire certain things. Thus the language becomes a source of acquiring knowledge. Most of the people think and communicate in their mother tongue, but for certain educational and political or financial purposes they have to use certain other languages usually the foreign languages.

The learning of second language is not an easy task. It is complex, complicated and laborious activity that demands consistent attention, practice and effective learning environment. Any disorder in the teaching process, students' low level of motivation and interest for learning second language, nature of the language being learnt may cause anxiety among the learners. The level of anxiety influences the language learning outcomes to a great extent (Wei, 2007). Therefore, second language learning requires anxiety free and comfortable classroom learning environment.

In Pakistani perspective English is a compulsory subject from primary to graduation level. The performance of students in this subject is not an exemplary one (Waseem & Tahira, 2013). Students are often complaining about the language learning classroom environment and feel that they are not being taught English in the true way it should be taught. Moreover, the complexity of teaching English becomes even more when it is taught in the multilingual context of Pakistan. The students have to learn English along with their native (any of the regional languages e.g. Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Kashmiri, Photohari, Brahvi, Balti, Saraiki etc.), national (Urdu) and religious (Araic) languages. In such circumstances specific efforts and strategies are required to overcome the student' learning deficiencies and language learning anxiety (Javed, Eng, Mohamed & Sam 2013).

The present study is an effort to assess the English language students' perceptions about their learning environment and the level of anxiety being experienced by them. An attempt is made to determine the relationship between English language learning classroom environment and the level of anxiety experienced by the secondary school students.

## **II. Literature Review**

Language learning is influenced by number of factors including learners' interest, attitude towards a particular language, need for learning that language, the learning environment and the level of anxiety experienced by them. Anxiety significantly affects the learning of English. MacIntyre & Gardner (1994) described anxiety as the feeling of tension and uneasiness especially related to second or foreign language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning, or it is the worry and fearful reaction of the learners while learning or speaking second or foreign language during every day communication. In the same way Zhang (2001) described anxiety as psychological strain faced by the learner while learning language or using it. On the other hand Clement (1980) described language anxiety as a "complex construct that deals with learners' psychology in terms of their feelings, self-esteem, and self-confidence". Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) were the first to conceptualize language learning anxiety as a unique type of anxiety specific to the learning of second or foreign language.

Language anxiety has become a concern in the context of second or foreign language learning (Trang, 2012). To overcome the effects of anxiety, the focus is laid upon the improvement of learning environment. The environment of school, especially the classroom learning environment, is very importance for the learners. Fraser (2001) states that by the time of competition of university education students spend up to 20,000 hours in educational institutions. Therefore, study of students' experiences in school especially their classroom learning environments is of much significance.

The notion learning environment means "social, physical, psychological and pedagogical context in which learning takes place and which affects learners' outcomes and attitudes" (Fraser, 2007& 2012).The concept of a learning environment exists since 1936 when Lewin proposed that both the environment of the classroom and its interaction with personal characteristics of individual are strong factors of their behavior. To this end, he developed the formula  $B = f(P, E)$  where behavior (B) is a result of the interaction between the person (P) and environmental factors (E). Moreover, results of different studies conducted over the last 40 years or so have provided evidences that the classroom environment quality in schools is a significant basis of student learning in the classroom (Fraser, 2007, 2012). Hence, students are likely to learn better when they positively perceive their classroom environment (Dorman &Fraser, 2009; Velayutham & Aldridge, 2012). Thus an effective learning environment contains learners working at ease with their own personal histories, values, assumptions, beliefs, rights, duties, obligations and learning styles (Donato, 2000).

Several studies had been conducted to determine the influence of learning environment of the classroom upon the English language learning anxiety. Some of the studies (Dorman &Fraser, 2009; Velayutham& Aldridge, 2012; Fraser, 2007, 2012) highlighted that both the teacher and the students can make efforts through mutual cooperation for reducing anxiety in English learning process. At the same time their mutual coordination will also be helpful in overcoming speaking apprehension and fears of getting insulted in the class. Studies about English language learning process and the anxieties experienced by the students blames the multilingual Pakistani perspective for the anxiety among English students (Waseem, &Tahira,2013; Javed, Eng, Mohamed &Sam, 2013; Awan, Azher, Anwer&Naz, 2010; Jabeen, Mahmood, & Sobia2011).

#### **A. Research Questions**

The present research focused upon finding the answers to the following research questions regarding students' perceptions about learning environment of classroom and their relationship with learning anxiety of English language;

- i. Is there any significant relationship of students' perceptions about classroom learning environment with their English language learning anxiety?
- ii. Do the students' perceptions about classroom learning environment significantly affect their English language learning anxiety?

#### **III. Research Design and Methodology**

The study at hand is of quantitative nature which was accomplished through survey technique using two questionnaires. Moreover, a study that describes the existing phenomena is also termed as a descriptive research (Creswell, 2012; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison 2007).As far as population of the study is concerned it was spread over thirty

six districts in Punjab province of Pakistan. For the selection of a representative and adequate sample, per square kilometer population density of these districts was taken as criterion standard. Thus a total of four districts viz. Okara, Kasur, Faisalabad, and Lahore, were randomly selected from the districts with population density of 500 or more people per square kilometer. From each district twenty four secondary schools were again randomly chosen. Schools from each of selected district were further divided into two groups i.e. urban secondary schools and rural secondary schools. Finally each of the stratum was again divided into two sub-strata i.e. male secondary schools and female secondary schools. Thus 6 male and 6 female public secondary each from rural and urban area were selected randomly from each district. For the selection of students from the sampled schools, one section of 9<sup>th</sup> class was also selected randomly. So, the sample of the study comprised of 3636 s9th graders from a total of 96 secondary schools.

For the purpose of data collection two scales were used. The first scale viz. English Language Classroom Environment scale (ELCES) was administered to measure perceptions of students about their environment of their English classroom. To conduct the study at hand customized form of Chinese Language Classroom Environment Inventory (CLCEI) developed by Chua, Wong and Chen (2001) was adapted. It consisted of six factors viz. teacher support, involvement, task orientation, cooperation and equity. Total number of items in the scale were 48. For determining reliability coefficient of *ELCES* it was tried out on a limited scale to determine the coefficient of reliability and it was found as  $\alpha = 0.94$ .

The second scale viz. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLACS) was also adapted to measure students' anxiety during learning English language. This scale was developed by Horwitz and Cope (1986). There were 33 items measuring three factors of students' anxiety in English language classroom namely, communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. During tryout the value of Cronbach Alpha i.e. reliability coefficient was found as  $\alpha = 0.78$ . The summary of the tryout results for both the scales is shown in Table 1 below;

**Table 1:** Mean, Standard Deviation and Reliability Coefficient of Research Instruments

Scale Name	No. of Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach Alpha Reliability Coefficient
<i>ELCES</i>	48	182.39	34.04	0.94
<i>ELCAS</i>	32	101.01	17.37	0.78

#### IV. Findings and Results

The collected data was tabulated using SPSS and analyzed by applying different test from inferential statistics. The major findings of the data analysis are as under;

The environment of English language classroom is conducive ( $\bar{x} = 3.80$ ) in the secondary schools. Task orientation ( $\bar{x} = 3.92$ ) and equity ( $\bar{x} = 3.90$ ) are the significant factors of classroom environment.

**Table 2:** Means Score and Standard Deviations of the Factors of ELCES

Factors of ELCES	Mean	Standard Deviation
Student Cohesiveness	3.84	0.86
Teacher Support	3.73	0.92
Involvement	3.63	0.88
Task Orientation	3.92	0.84
Cooperation	3.79	0.84
Equity	3.90	1.00
Total	3.80	0.89

n= 3636

As far as the level of English language learning anxiety of secondary school students is concerned, it was observed that they were anxiety ridden ( $\bar{x}$ = 3.70). Level of test anxiety was maximum ( $\bar{x}$ = 4.32) whereas their anxiety about the communication apprehension was at the lower side ( $\bar{x}$ = 2.92).

**Table 3:** Descriptive Statistics on ELCAS Dimensions

ELCAS Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation
Communication Apprehension	2.92	0.77
Fear of Negative Evaluation	3.88	0.77
Test Anxiety	4.32	0.89
Total	3.70	0.81

n= 3636

The relationship between students' perceptions about learning environment of classroom and their anxiety in English language learning is significant ( $r$ =-0.38) and negative. It reflects that better learning environment can reduce the students' English language learning anxiety and vice versa.

**Table4:** Correlation of Students' Perceptions about Learning Environment with their Anxiety in English Language

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	r	Significance
<b>Classroom Learning Environment</b>	3636	3.80	0.71	-0.38**	0.00
<b>English language Learning anxiety</b>	3636	3.47	0.65		

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01

Similarly, different factor of students' perceptions about learning environment of their classroom are significantly and negatively correlated with sub-factors of English language learning anxiety. The student cohesiveness ( $r$ =-0.14), teacher support ( $r$ =-0.11), involvement ( $r$ =-0.17), task orientation ( $r$ =-0.17), cooperation ( $r$ =-0.13) and the equity ( $r$ =-0.13) factors of ELCES are negatively but significantly correlated to the communication apprehension.

**Table 5:** Analysis of Correlation “r”, Regression Weights “ $\beta$ ” and Multiple Correlation

Factors of ELCES	Communication Apprehension		Fear of Negative Evaluation		Test Anxiety	
	R	$\beta$	r	$\beta$	r	$\beta$
Student Cohesiveness	-0.14**	0.05*	-0.46**	0.26**	-0.35**	0.21**
Teacher Support	-0.11**	-0.04	-0.37**	0.03*	-0.25**	-0.04
Involvement	-0.17**	0.10**	-0.43**	0.17**	-0.34**	0.14**
Task Orientation	-0.17**	0.09**	-0.40**	0.06*	-0.33**	0.08**
Cooperation	-0.13**	-0.02	-0.37**	0.02	-0.29**	0.02
Equity	-0.13**	0.09	-0.36**	0.08**	-0.28**	0.07**
Multiple Correlation R		0.19**		0.52**		0.40**
R <sup>2</sup>		0.04		0.27		0.16

\*\*p<0.01, \*p<0.05, n=3636

The analysis of regression reflects that standardized beta weights of student cohesiveness ( $\beta=0.05$ ), involvement ( $\beta=0.10$ ), and the task orientation ( $\beta=0.09$ ) significantly effects in explaining the dependent variable. The multiple correlation score ( $R=0.19$ ) of communication apprehension is significant with three scales of ELCES. The  $R^2$  value shows that 4% of variance in “students’ communication apprehension” to their English language class was attributable to their classroom learning environment.

Moreover, correlations described in Table above indicates that student cohesiveness ( $r=-0.46$ ), teacher support ( $r=-0.37$ ), involvement ( $r=-0.43$ ), task orientation ( $r=-0.40$ ), cooperation ( $r=-0.37$ ) and equity ( $r=-0.36$ ) factors of ELCES are significantly and negatively correlated with their fear of negative evaluation.

The standardized beta weights for the next factor of the scale show that student cohesiveness ( $\beta=0.26$ ), teacher support ( $\beta=0.04$ ), involvement ( $\beta=0.17$ ), task orientation ( $\beta=0.06$ ) and cooperation ( $\beta=0.080$ ) are significantly effecting and contributing to the explanation of the dependent variable. The value of multiple correlation score ( $R=0.52$ ) for fear of negative evaluation with all the five factors of ELCES is significant. Finally the  $R^2$  value reflects that 27% of variance in students’ fear of negative evaluation to their English language class was contributing to the explanation of their classroom learning environment.

Furthermore, the correlations analysis reflects that student cohesiveness ( $r=-0.35$ ), teacher support ( $r=-0.25$ ), involvement ( $r=-0.34$ ), task orientation ( $r=-0.33$ ), cooperation ( $r=-0.29$ ) and equity ( $r=-0.28$ ) factors of ELCES are significantly and negatively correlated with the test anxiety. Although all the correlations are of the moderate value, yet it is important to note that most of the factors are significantly correlated with the aspects of the said scale.

Moreover, the standardized beta weights again reflects that student cohesiveness ( $\beta=0.21$ ), involvement ( $\beta=0.14$ ), task orientation ( $\beta=0.08$ ) and equity ( $\beta=0.07$ ) also significantly explaining the dependent variable. The value of the multiple correlation score ( $R=0.40$ ) of test anxiety with the four factors of ELCAS is significant. Moreover

the  $R^2$  value specifies that 16% of variance in students' test anxiety to their English language class was because their classroom learning environment.

## **V. Conclusions and Discussion**

The study at hand was conducted to determine the English language learning anxiety, students' perception about the classroom learning environment and the factors of environment which cause anxiety among students. The study revealed that conducive English language classroom learning environment reduces English language learning anxiety and vice versa. This result of the study supports a number of previous studies in the field of English language learning (Javed, Eng, Mohamed & Sam, 2013; Dorman, & Fraser, 2009; Waseem, & Tahira, 2013). Another result of the study states that students' cohesiveness, involvement, task orientation and teacher support significantly contribute in reducing communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and text anxiety. It is a well-established fact from the social psychology that students' mutual cooperation and the support from teacher can reduce their number of problems. The same is shown by the present study. It had been reflected from the previous researches that test anxiety and communication apprehension is the result of the lack of self-confidence of the threatening environment. Therefore, if the environment of the classroom and the school is conducive and learning supported, the students will feel at ease (Fraser, 1986; Donato, 2000; Velayutham & Aldridge, 2012; Fraser, 2012). Therefore, it is recommended that the institutions should take measures to enhance teachers' support for the students. Moreover, by arranging different activities like supports competitions, debates, fun fairs, students' mutual cohesiveness may also be improved. This cohesiveness can bring the students closer enough to mutually discuss their learning problems. Fear about speaking and the test anxiety can only be reduced if the students are provided enough opportunities to mingle together in the classroom and out of the class.

Similarly, the study found that students are experiencing high test anxiety and inclination towards English language learning and low communication apprehension and motivation towards English language learning. Inclination towards English language learning has always been a problem in multilingual societies like Pakistan (Shami, Taj & Faisal 2007). The major reason for low inclination is that the students have focus upon structural components of different languages, sometimes these may contradict each other. The result is that the students become reluctant in learning structural and grammatical rules of different languages simultaneously. Another reason in the past had been the inherited hate from the English. Certain religious and nationalist sections in the sub-continent had been campaigning against English because it was the language of foreign invaders, British, who ruled them for abbot hundred years. Lack of English teaching facilities like trained English teachers and appropriate supporting materials, is another cause of the low inclination towards English language learning along with the nonconductive learning environment (Jabeen, Mahmood, & Sobia 2011; Awan, Azher, Anwer & Naz, 2010).

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