The Impact of Social-Economic-Status on EFL Learners' Foreign Language Anxiety in Language Classrooms in Afghanistan

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Abstract:

Studies conducted on language anxiety have found that foreign language anxiety (FLA) is an affecting variable in language learning. There is a negative correlation between foreign language anxiety and learners achievements (Aida, 1994; and Horwitz, 2001). This study aims to examine English as foreign language learners' FLA in language classrooms. It also investigates the impact of SES on learners' foreign language anxiety inside language classroom. The participants of the study are 100 first year EFL undergraduates from Nangarhar University in Afghanistan. The adapted version of (Horwitz, et al., 1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) is used for data collection in the study. The results suggested that learners' suffer from high level of FLA. It revealed that learners with lower socio-economic background experienced higher levels of FLA in their foreign language classrooms. learners from low-income backgrounds usually attend schools with lower funding levels and this situation reduced learners' motivation which affects their LL and achievements inside and outside of the classroom.

Keywords: foreign language learning, foreign language classroom, Social-economic-status, FLCAS

1. Introduction

In today's world the importance of English language is undeniable in all fields of life. The massive use and understanding of English language among people has made it the most important language for learners internationally. Also, with such worldwide expansion of English language, the demand to acquire good communication skills has increased all around the globe. For learners of English as a foreign language, the main goal of learning English language is to master good communication skills in the language (Mai, 2011).

However, English as a Foreign Language learners experience FLA in English language classrooms when they participate in classroom activities, especially, in speaking activities and when they have to produce something orally. There are many factors that causes such anxiety in EFL learners and Social-economic-status is one of these factor that contributes to learners' FLA in language classrooms (Jeynes, 2002). This study investigates the impact of SES on EFL learners' FLA in Afghanistan. The following part explains the relationship between learners' FLA and their SES in details.

Literature review

Among many other factors, socioeconomic-status (SES) may also cause differences in the development of FL skills in individuals. From time to time, researchers have found that SES affects learners' outcomes (Jeynes, 2002; Eamon, 2005; Hochschild, 2003; McNeal, 2001). A student's SES is most generally determined by combining parents' educational level, occupational status, and income level (Jeynes 2002). In a study on learners' family SES, Graetz (1995) found that learners' family's social-economic background has a great impact on their academic achievements, and it was concluded that the main source of educational imbalance among students and their academic success strongly depends on their parents' social-economic standard. Similarly, Considine and Zappala (2002) in their study on the influence of social and economic disadvantage in learning on school students found that parents' social, educational and economic advantages definitely strengthen learners' higher level of success in the future. Besides, they also mentioned that these parents shore up sufficient psychological and emotional support to their children by providing them good educational and learning environment, which boost their confidence and improve FL learning skills they needed for their success. McNeal (2001) indicated that SES dominates other educational influences such as parental involvement. Escarce (2003) mentioned that families' total incomes, monthly or annually and their expenses, also greatly affect learners' language learning and academic opportunities available to young people. He further pointed out that learners from low-income backgrounds usually attend schools with lower funding levels, and this situation reduced their achievement motivation and high risk of education malfunctioning in future life, which is due to residential segregation (Escarce, 2003). The study pointed that lack of resources and opportunities for students because of their low family SES and the other stressors associated with poverty may affect their outcomes. According to Eamon (2005), those students usually come out from low socio-economic status or area show low achievements in studies and obtained low scores as compared to the other students or their counter parts.

In a study on FL classroom anxiety and its relationship with students achievement, Awan (2010) found that students from rural background demonstrated lower achievements. She argued that the parents' level of education in rural areas is lower and the students learn much of the English language in their homes.

Consequently, students from rural background experience more FL anxiety in the language classroom. Lamb (2012) also found in his study that students in rural areas, who were mostly from lower social classes, had weaker visions of themselves as successful users of English in the future. It is worth mentioning that majority of Afghan students come from the rural parts of the country where most families are not rich and cannot support their children much in education. Moreover, lack of facilities at school level can also be observed in the rural areas. It is mentioned in the literature that the standard and type of educational institutions in which the learners get their education strongly affect students' language learning and achievements. As Sparkles (1999) pointed out, schools' environments students are learning in and students' expectations by their teacher have great influence on learners' achievements. The teachers who work in those schools without basic facilities do not have high expectation for their students. Similarly, the students understand that their teacher do not expect them to record high achievements, which leads them to poor language learning and achievements. Kwesiga (2002) also acknowledged that students' language learning is also influenced by the school in which they learnt, and he also urged that the number of the facilities a school provides, determines the quality of the school, which in turn affects its learners' language learning and achievements.

Access to technology can also affect FL learning. The use of technologies (such as computers, networks, E-mail, YouTube, TV and other interactive multimedia et cetera) assists learning and teaching technique of integrating real-life target language situations into the language classroom. In such particular environment where technology is used, learners increasingly develop their language skills by being exposed to real target language environments which helps increase their language comprehension. It is proposed that learners can learn a large amount of language spontaneously when there is sufficient comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985). In other words, language acquisition only takes place when comprehensible input is delivered sufficiently. Modern educational technologies today have provided more opportunities for helping teachers and learners in language teaching, evaluation, and learning (Dixon & Johnson, 2001). For example, these technologies offer easy access to a big amount of learning resources in different ways, specifically through the Internet. Cassady and Gridley (2005) pointed out that the use of the Internet in language classrooms provides learners access to a large amount of meaningful learning materials. Also, interactions among students as well as teacher and students have been greatly facilitated by learning and communication technologies both inside and outside the class. Likewise, it has helped learning and instruction to prevent the limitation of time and space to a large extent (Mellati, Zangoei, & Khademi, 2015). In this regard, language teachers should make every effort to employ a wide range of teaching techniques by using technology to create more realistic situations for learning in language classrooms to stimulate learners' language acquisition.

This study needs to:

1. Investigate the impact of social-economic status on learners' FL speaking anxiety in English language classrooms' speaking activities.
2. Identify the reasons of learners' FL speaking anxiety related to SES.

Methodology

The participants in the study were 100 EFL first year undergraduates. They are all enrolled in their four years program of BA (Bachelor of Arts) degree year (2018/2019). Only thirty participants of the total number are females. Their ages range from (17-20) years. All the participants of this study are English major EFL learners only.

Research instrument and data analysis

The instrument used for data collection in the study is a questionnaire "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) adopted from (Horwitzet al.,1986)". It is a five-point Likert scale developed by (Horwitzet al., 1986). The data obtained from the questionnaire is presented in the form of descriptive statistics which was analyzed through SPSS version (20).

Results and Findings

Learners' level of FLA based on their families income and LL background

The descriptive statistics of the different groups of learners' indicated differences in learners' levels of FLA based on the family monthly income and LL background. It was found that the first group with monthly income of less than $200 was (35.7%) of the total number of the participants, the largest among all the groups. The mean score of learners' FLA in this group was M= 3.5543, SD = 0.51516 which was very high. Similarly, the second group with a monthly income of up to $300 which was (14.8%) of the total population scored a mean score of M= 3.5526, SD = 0.37781. However, the third group which was only (8.7%) with an income of $400scored the highest mean score of M= 3.5526, SD = 2.5556 among all the groups. The fourth group with an income of up to $500, was (13.0%) only, and scored a mean score of M= 3.4808, SD = 0.63201.The level of FLA of learners in this group was comparatively lower than learners the first three groups. The next group which forms(10.4%) of the total participants with an income of $600 per month scored a mean score of M= 3.3864, SD = 0.38529. The last group (17.4%) scored a mean score of M= 3.2424, SD = 0.65282 had the lowest level of FLA on FLCAS. It was found in group differences that as learners' family's income is lower the FLA level is greater on FLCAS. The results of the descriptive statistics of groups with different family incomes indicated that those learners who come from lower socioeconomic background score higher level of FLA compare to those learners whose family's income is higher. The results are shown in the table below Table 4.1.

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*Mean scores, N, Percent, and std. deviation of learners' level of FLA and groups differences
by family income and LL background (urban vs rural) n = 115*

Group	Mean	N	Percent	Std. Deviation
Family income/month				
Less than $200	3.5543	41	35.7%	.51516
$201-300	3.5526	17	14.8%	.37781
$301-400	3.5545	10	8.7%	.25556
$401-500	3.4808	15	13.0%	.63201
$501-600	3.3864	12	10.4%	.38529
More than $600	3.2424	20	17.4%	.65282
FL learning background				
Urban	3.0564	29	25.22%	.47575
Rural	3.6131	86	74.78%	.45181

Moreover, the descriptive statistics also shown differences in the levels of learners' FLA based on their LL background (Urban and Rural). The study found that (25%) of the learners come from urban parts of the country and they score a mean score of M= 3.0564, SD = 0.47575. Those learners come from rural population are almost (75%) of the total number of learners. The result of the data depicted that majority of the learners are from rural settings and they score a mean score of M= 3.6131, SD = 0.45181. It indicated that those learners who studied their FL in the rural settings scored higher level of FLA compared to the learners who come from the urban parts of the country. Refer to Table above.

Discussion

The descriptive statistics of the questionnaire data pointed out learners' levels of FLA was high for all the groups on FLCAS. However, the data showed differences among the groups mean scores of learners' levels of FLA in respect with their families' monthly incomes. It was found that those learners come from low-income families scored higher mean scores of FLA on the FLCAS compared to those learners who come from comparatively with higher income families. It means that, learners' levels of FLA were affected by their families' incomes. This finding is similar with (Jeynes, 2002; Eamon, 2005; Escarce, 2003). Escarce (2003) stated that family' total income, monthly or annually and their expenses, greatly affect learners' language learning and academic opportunities. Because, learners from low-income backgrounds usually attend schools with lower funding levels and this situation reduced learners' achievement motivation which affects their LL achievements. The reason for this finding is that on one side the families with low income could not support their children' education well because of their poor economic conditions, on the other hand most parents are uneducated usually

farmers and labor worker. Similarly, the descriptive statistics also shown differences in the learners' levels of FLA based on their LL background (urban and rural). The results indicated that majority (75%) of the participants in the study come from the rural parts of the country. It was found that both groups of learners (rural and urban) exhibited high levels of FLA. However, learners' come from the urban population scored lower levels of FLA compare those of the rural population. Awan (2010) also found similar finding. She stated that students from rural background demonstrated lower achievements compared to the learners from the urban population. This may be because learners in the rural areas are mostly from lower social class and their families cannot support their children's education well. Also, most schools in the rural area do not have appropriate facilities for English LL. There is also a lack opportunities of FLL in the rural areas outside of the classroom. Besides; most English teachers in the rural populations are not very professional and cannot teach this subject according to their students' needs. To help these learners improve their LL achievements, it is important that they should be provided with the equal LL facilities and opportunities in classroom and outside in the rural areas. More importantly, teaching level of English language should be paid more attention to be improved at school level in the rural parts in the country. It will help these learners to achieve more to overcome their FLA in the language classrooms.

It is worth mentioning that to help anxious learners; language teachers should first acknowledge the existence of learners' FLA in the classroom and determine the causes of the phenomenon. This will help language teachers identify where and how they can help reduce their students' FLA in the classroom.

Conclusion

This study was conducted in order to investigate that how socio-economic conditions and language learning background affect learners' FLA. The study revealed that learners with lower socioeconomic background experienced higher levels of FLA in their foreign language classrooms. It means that families with lower total incomes could not support their children's education properly because of their low-income. Also, mostly parents in the lower income families are uneducated mostly farmers and labor worker and cannot pay much attention to their children's education, which greatly affect these learners' language learning and academic opportunities. Therefore, learners from low-income backgrounds usually attend schools with lower funding levels and this situation reduced learners' achievement motivation which affects their LL and achievements inside and outside of the classroom. Similarly, the study also found that learners from the urban background score comparatively lower

levels of FLA in the FL classroom. The reason is that, in the rural settings the schools do not offer enough facilities for foreign language learning in the classroom, and most English teachers are also not very professional and well trained to teach English in the rural schools. Moreover, opportunities for learning and practicing FL are very limited outside of the classroom in the rural areas.

Moreover, the study also revealed that learners with lower socioeconomic background experienced higher levels of FLA in their foreign language classrooms. It means that families with lower total incomes could not support their children's education properly because of their low-income. Also, most parents in the lower income families are uneducated mostly farmers and labor worker and cannot pay much attention to their children's education, which greatly affect these learners' language learning and academic opportunities. Therefore, learners from low-income backgrounds usually attend schools with lower funding levels and this situation reduced learners' achievement motivation which affects their LL and achievements inside and outside of the classroom. Similarly, the study also found that learners from the urban background score comparatively lower levels of FLA in the FL classroom. The reason is that, in the rural settings the schools do not offer enough facilities for foreign language learning in the classroom as compared to the urban schools. The use of technologies in language classrooms is very rare in schools in the rural areas and learners also do not have access to media which can help improve their FLL skills. Also, most English teachers are not very professional and well trained to teach English in the rural schools. Moreover, opportunities for learning and practicing FL are very limited outside of the classroom in the rural areas.

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