Urban and Rural EFL Learners' Strategies to Alleviate Anxiety

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Foreign language anxiety as an affective factor likely to debilitate and facilitate language acquisition is prevalent amongst EFL learners. Previous studies compared the relationship between learners' language anxiety from distinct residential areas, but the comparing anxiety-coping strategies is limited. Thus, this study aims to portray coping strategies experienced by EFL learners in urban and rural areas. Data was collected through an interview and questionnaire. The results showed that distinct anxiety-coping strategies such as preparation, relaxation, positive thinking and so on were employed by learners. However, the resignation strategy was rarely used. Consequently, it is suggested that English teachers allow students a silent period before they start to be confident enough to speak in English as forcing them to speak could cause anxiety leading to students' disappointment about their own performance.

Key words: *Language anxiety, EFL, urban learners, rural learners, anxiety-coping strategies.*

Introduction

Language anxiety is an affective factor to second language acquisition which is experienced by many foreign language learners, especially when speaking skills are performed. Speaking in a foreign language comprises of varied skills such as pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. It becomes more difficult when the foreign language being learned has uncommon sounds in the first language, different language convention, and inconsistency of spelling and sound as in English.

The skill itself will not be sufficient since the psychological aspect as language anxiety can intervene, which eventually hinders students' language production. This results in myriads of disadvantages entailing disinclination to participate, withdrawal, hesitation, mental block, etc. Besides, communication apprehension is said to manifest in difficulties when speaking in

groups or in public (Puškar, 2010). It is affirmed that speaking in a foreign language is deemed as the most anxiety-producing experience (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991b). Therefore, it is essential to explored strategies to alleviate language anxiety in the current study.

Foreign language anxiety is categorised into three main components encompassing communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et. al., 1986). Communication apprehension is originally formulated to refer to "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p.78). In addition, test anxiety is "an unpleasant feeling or emotional state that has both physiological and behavioural concomitants which is experienced by the anxious learner when taking a formal test or other evaluative situations" (Lucas, Miraflores, & Go, 2011, p.102). This can distract learners' performance, as affirmed by Liu & Zhang (2013) according to whom test anxiety is one of the powerful predictors of learners' performance in English. Fear of negative evaluation comprises of avoidance of evaluative situations and negative thinking of others' evaluation of self (Lucas et. al., 2011). Humphries (2011) suggests that one way to reduce the fear of negative evaluations is by forming friendships since it diminishes stress amongst language learners. Hence, these constructs are essential to explore language anxiety, particularly its coping strategies.

Research in language anxiety has long been carried out and it seems to further continue. Recently, foreign language anxiety research specifying symptoms amongst students has been conducted (Gregerson & Horwitz, 2002; Gregersen, 2005 & 2009). Furthermore, other topics were also encompassed its relation to productive skills such as speaking and writing (Cheng, Y., Horwitz, E. K., & Schallert, D. L. 1999; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Argaman & Abu-Rabia, 2002; Woodrow, 2006; Ewald, 2007; Gkonou, 2011; Hewitt & Stephenson, 2011; Choi 2013), receptive skills such as listening and reading (Elkhafaifi, 2005; Wu, 2006; Bekleyen, 2009; Otair & Aziz, 2017; Chow, Chiu, & Simpson, 2018;), the effect on achievement (Ghorbandordinejad & Ahmadabad, 2016, Sajedi, 2016; Teimouri, Goetze, & Plonsky, 2019), teacher variables (Huang, Eslami, & Hu, 2010; Dewaele, Witney, Saito, & Dewaele, 2017; Djafri, & Wimbarti, 2018), and coping strategies (Kondo & Ling, 2004) and Indrianty (2012). Nevertheless, research depicting coping strategies amongst learners in urban and rural areas are rare. Furthermore, one strategy appropriate for students in one area might be inappropriate in another.

As a result, it becomes necessary to conduct a study on the strategies and factors of language anxiety. The aim is to examine the strategies used by urban and rural students to cope with language anxiety in speaking.

Methodology

This study employs quantitative and qualitative approaches. Study respondents consisted of two sample classes of two senior high schools located in urban and rural areas in a city in Indonesia. The two group samples had a similar category of language anxiety level of speaking as measured by means of the modified Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Of the 60 learners, two learners, one from the urban the other from the rural school, were abandoned due to their absence in the classroom, which prompted the research investigation with the involvement of the 58 remaining learners.

A questionnaire was adapted from Kondo & Ling's typology of strategies used by learners to cope with their language anxiety (2004), providing five strategies for the questionnaire: preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer-seeking and resignation. The adaptation was carried out, out of necessity of this study, which includes translating the source in English into Bahasa Indonesia, adding the context in which this study is seeking foreign language anxiety, and arranging the 36 questionnaire items based on the category. Meanwhile, to collect data vis-à-vis factors triggering language anxiety, the interview of six students was recorded, firstly, to enrich the data collected through the questionnaire and secondly to avoid the researcher's subjectivity to answer the research questions.

The interview guideline was prepared once permission from the two schools was received. This was then followed by revising the questionnaire. Subsequently, piloting was administered to a senior high school student to avoid bias about the content of interview guideline and questionnaire. Once piloting was completed, the instruments were revised once again. Subsequently, the questionnaire and interview guideline were first administered in the urban school then the rural school. Students were asked fill out the questionnaire while they were given descriptions of each item so that their answer would not mislead. The administration was the same in both schools. The questionnaire administrations were followed by the interview of six students which was recorded for further analysis.

The data from the questionnaire were tabulated and then calculated to see which strategies are mostly used by students. This was then triangulated with the data from the interview about coping strategies. Moreover, the interview data was transcribed then displayed before categorisation. The displayed data are separated from those needed for the factors and those associated with strategies of language anxiety. Of the displayed data, themes are drawn in compliance with what is sought in this study. This was to form the findings of the study, which were then interpreted and discussed in relation to underpinning theories as well as previous studies.

The questionnaire's score was based on the option: 'Yes' which scored 1 and 'No' which scored 0. The scores were then calculated within the same category item and divided by the students filling out the questionnaire accordingly. Meanwhile, the interview data was transcribed, then read over and over again. Themes generated were categorised into a table that contains the representation of each theme.

Findings and Discussion

Foreign Language Anxiety-Coping Strategies

Five main strategies of dealing with anxiety are generated from the collected data, dependent on the result of the questionnaire and interview administered to the learners. The questionnaire results of the total number of students is shown in Table 1. Overall, the anxiety-coping strategy mostly used is preparation (2.47), followed by relaxation (2.40), positive thinking (2.38), peer-seeking (2.25), and resignation (1.90). The result of the most frequent strategy amongst other strategies is preparation. This result indicates that cognitive aspect performs more dominantly than the affective aspects of urban and rural learners.

Table 1: Overall use of anxiety-coping strategies

Anxiety-coping strategies	Scores	Frequency
Preparation	2.47	Often
Relaxation	2.40	Often
Positive Thinking	2.38	Often
Peer-Seeking	2.25	Seldom
Resignation	1.90	Seldom

Often = 2.34-3.0; Seldom = 1.67-2.33; Never = 1.0-1.66

In addition, Table 2 is presented to better discern each strategy partially from learners of the urban and rural schools. The table indicates that there is a distinction between the results of urban and rural learners. Amongst urban learners, preparation (2.47) is the most frequently used strategy, meanwhile amongst rural learners the most frequently used strategy is relaxation (2.51). However, similarity is also found where the least used strategy by both groups of learners is resignation. The frequency of resignation strategy used by urban learners is 1.91, whereas the frequency of that strategy used by rural learners is 1.88. The three most frequently used anxiety-coping strategies are discussed below.

Table 2: Urban and Rural Learners' Use of Anxiety-Coping Strategies

Anxiety-coping strategies	Results			
	Urban Scores	Frequency	Rural Scores	Frequency
Preparation	2.47	Often	2.48	Often
Relaxation	2.32	Seldom	2.51	Often
Positive Thinking	2.38	Often	2.39	Often
Peer-Seeking	2.25	Seldom	2.24	Seldom
Resignation	1.91	Seldom	1.88	Seldom

Often = 2.34-3.0; Seldom = 1.67-2.33; Never = 1.0-1.66

Preparation

Preparation is the first anxiety-coping strategy identified in this study, discussed by learners in the questionnaire as well as interview. The identification of preparation as one of the strategies dealing with anxiety is consistent with previous studies (see Kondo & Ling, 2004; Wei, 2012). Preparation s can be defined as "an attempt at controlling the impeding threat by improving learning and study strategies" (Kondo & Ling, 2004, p.262). It may be undertaken before an English class, speaking performance or tests, including help from others such as classmates and English teachers.

Data from the closed-ended questionnaire shows that from the 18 items concerning preparation, the average of urban learners is 2.47 (often). This constitutes the most frequently used strategy amongst urban learners, reflecting previous research, according to which preparation is the most common strategy used by learners to cope with anxiety (see Kondo & Ling, 2004; Wei, 2012). The score also indicates that learners from urban secondary schools often prepare well before a speaking performance so that they can alleviate their language anxiety. Likewise, the average of rural learners signifying preparation strategy that is often used is (2.48). According to Wei (2013), preparation is undertaken to attain better achievement in learning English with less anxiety. In preparation, learners allocate considerable time to study English prior to and after class as being well-prepared might make learners more confident and less anxious. This is due to the fact that there is an increase of mastery of subject matter subjectively perceived by learners (Kondo & Ling, 2004). In other words, it is likely that greater amount of time allotted to learners for preparation, the more confident and less anxious they will be.

The item most frequently used by urban learners is concerned with reading carefully in advance (2.88). This implies that reading carefully can assist them in preparation before an English class or speaking performance. Meanwhile, the least used situation for preparation is learners asking for slower speech from their teacher. It can be inferred that learners not having

a problem in understanding the teacher's speech is a seemingly insignificant factor in preparing their performance. It is also possible that learners are too shy to ask teachers to speak slower so they prefer to use other tactics of preparation strategy. In the rural school, the highest average (2.92) encompasses three items accounting for asking for help from friends, trying to perform one's best, and trying to guess the meaning of a difficult passage. The tactic of asking help from friends amongst the rural learners denotes strong relationships between individuals, which is also asserted by McKenzie, Murray, & Booth (2013). Meanwhile, the least used tactic in this strategy is similar to urban learners', concern asking for slower speech from the teacher.

As support for the preparation strategy, the result of the open-ended questionnaire is presented in Extract 15 below.

Saying the words repeatedly in order to be fluent.
Asking friends to listen for correction. **(Extract 15, PR#2q#US5)**

In addition to saying the words repeatedly, it appears that being corrected directly by a friend prior to speaking performance does not lead to embarrassment, although it is found in the previous section that making mistakes in real speaking performance is deemed embarrassing. The absence of embarrassment may be caused by a close relationship. This is consistent with Humphries' finding (2011) which shows that forming friendships can alleviate stress as a result of reduction of the fear of negative evaluation. Finding help from a friend as a preparation strategy in coping with language anxiety is also stated by one rural learner as discernible in the extract below.

Trying to ask a friend whether I am right or not. **(Extract 16, PR#25q#RS23)**

The above extract indicates that instead of inhibiting the learner from learning, language anxiety as experienced by the learner contributes to willingness to learn, including facilitating anxiety. It refers to anxiety which can encourage learners to improve learning achievement (Humphries, 2011; Gass & Selinker, 2008; Suherdi, 2012), manifested by anxious learners who keep learning to prepare and give their best for the test. Moreover, it is predominantly found that preparation through asking help from friends is deemed significant for dealing with anxiety before tests as suggested by Iizuka (2010), as cooperative interactions with classmates in certain classroom situations might be useful to deal with foreign language anxiety.

Relaxation

The second strategy identified in this study is relaxation strategy. According to Kondo & Ling (2004, p.262), in this strategy learners attempt to alleviate "somatic anxiety symptoms" by making gestures or movements in order to improve their performance under the pressure of

language anxiety, characterised by taking a deep breath or calming themselves down. Similar to preparation strategy, the prevalence of this strategy is also the same as previous findings by Kondo & Ling (2004) and Wei (2013). In this study, relaxation strategy is manifested through not only during the performance but before as well.

Data from the closed-ended questionnaire results in an average score of 2.32 in the urban school and 2.51 in the rural school. Relaxation employed is a key strategy to overcome anxiety amongst rural students as well as forcing themselves to speak instead of remaining silent (Arulchelvan, et.al. 2019). It should be noted that while the former denotes a rare occasion of using relaxation strategy, the latter indicates that relaxation strategy is often employed by learners to cope with their language anxiety. In addition, the rural learners' score makes this strategy the most frequently used. The reason behind the use of this strategy may be due to the association between language anxiety and uneasy feelings or emotions. This is supported by MacIntyre & Gardner (1991) who maintain that language anxiety originated by negative expectations leading to worry and being over emotional. Therefore, it can be dealt with by creating relaxed situations in the mind.

Regarding the least and most frequently used items of this strategy in the closed-ended questionnaire, two items *"I try to relax*" and "*I try to calm down"* are the most common tactics employed by urban learners, while *"I close my eyes"* is the rarest item in use. These items are relatively similar to rural learners,' which implies that trying to calming activities are often undertaken in order to repress anxious feelings, regardless of this strategy's success in alleviating language anxiety. In addition, it is probable that closing one's eyes when experiencing anxiety is completed unconsciously. In addition, it can also be caused by learners' hesitancy about the effect of closing one's eyes to create a relaxed state of mind.
The use of this strategy is also found in the open-ended questionnaire as depicted by Extract 17 from one of the urban learners.

Usually if I feel anxious when speaking English, I will take a deep breath, and say a prayer for a while in order to slowly calm myself down, also I usually close my eyes, lower my voice, and try to imagine that there is no one before me (**Extract 17, RL#10q#US12).**

The above extract shows how learner cope with language anxiety about speaking English, by taking a deep breath and saying a prayer, closing the eyes, softening the voice, and imagining that no one is paying attention when they begin speaking. These tactics are undertaken to create relaxation for the learner as stated in the extract "*to slowly calm myself down.*" Furthermore, one of the rural learners also mentioned his relaxation strategy in the open-ended questionnaire through "*inhaling/exhaling, and trying to calm myself down*" (**RL #33q#RS24**). This complies with the result of the above closed-ended questionnaire according to which the most frequently

used tactic in relaxation strategy is to try to calm down. Perhaps the reason for this is that this strategy's tactics aim to create a calm condition.

In addition to relaxation strategy through gestures and movements, it is also found that this strategy is employed by means of utilizing other activities for digressing as presented in Extract 19, which is a rural learner's responses to the open-ended questionnaire on how to cope with language anxiety in speaking performance. The extract shows that relaxation strategy is employed by learners through playing a mobile phone to forget about anxiety. The use of mobile phones as a tactic to cope with language anxiety particularly in speaking performance is sensible since mobile phones are full of entertainment such as music, games and social networks. Moreover, anxiety is also diverted by means of drawing pictures, which to some extent seems to facilitate temporarily forgetting language anxiety while the learner is drawing.

I usually play my hand phone first so I forget about the anxious feeling.
I also like to draw something if I am feeling anxious. **(Extract 19, RL#29q#RS16)**

These tactics seem to create a temporary strategy in dealing with language anxiety because they are employed solely to stop thinking about the anxiety-provoking situation by busying themselves. The possible recurrence of this feeling seems to conform to general apprehension resulting from anxiety. It is argued that anxiety is indeed an unpleasant feeling which manifests as a result of reacting against dangerous situations, yet its source is frequently vague (Feist & Feist, 2009; Schultz & Schultz, 2012). In the same vein, Rachman (2004) argues that it is the vagueness that makes anxiety distinguishable from fear since according to May (1950, p.51), anxiety itself is deemed as "a vague and general apprehension." However, despite its re-emergence and vagueness, the strategy can be beneficial in temporarily precluding language anxiety from overwhelming one's self.

The purpose of each tactic in relaxation strategy is to bring about relaxation in learners, which according to Wei (2013) is characterized by helping learners to be relaxed to perform better such as concentrating on activities which do not provoke anxiety, taking a deep breath and imagining that the audience is less prepared. Furthermore, the anxiety dealt by the learners through tactics such as softening the voice when speaking English seems to bear a resemblance to the psychological perspective concerning anxiety. From a psychological perspective, anxiety can be a response to disturbed interpersonal relationships because 'frustration threatens some value or mode of interpersonal relationship which the individual holds vital to his or her security' (Horney, cited in May, 1950, p.138).

Positive Thinking

This strategy is characterized by learners exploiting their thoughts and imagining delivering positive stimulus towards situations considered to be threatening such as speaking in front of others. According to Wei (2013), this encompasses two aspects, a plan to work harder at English learning and self-encouragement. Self-encouragement can be achieved by learners by being determined and saying to themselves that everything will be okay and they will be successful while managing to work harder at learning English can stimulate positive attitude.

The use of this strategy can be seen in the result of the closed-ended questionnaire scoring an average of 2.38 and 2.39 consecutively for urban and rural learners. The results indicate that thinking positively is often employed by the learners in dealing with anxiety so that they can think of something pleasant or encouraging. The most frequently used tactic in the strategy is the item stating *'I say a prayer'* which is prevalent amongst learners from both urban and rural schools. It denotes the improvement of positive thinking through prayer. In addition, it appears that saying a prayer can be considered the best way to enable them to create positive mental processes in facing anxiety about speaking performance.

Encouragement of learners in alleviating anxiety by means of positive thinking is also found in the result of the open-ended questionnaire as shown by the following statements from two urban and rural learners, "*like ensuring myself, telling myself not to be* anxiety" (**PT#20q#US30**), and *"... trying to think positively, and to believe in my own ability."* (**PT#36q#RS21**). These responses are expressed as the learners are asked about how to cope with anxiety in speaking performance. Encouragement to believe in self ability indicates a sense of optimism to perform without hesitation. Thinking positively can also be achieved as shown in the below extract by one of the urban learners.

Interviewer: How?
US1: By praying, taking a breath, telling myself that everything is going to be alright. (**Extract 22, PT#2i**)

Positive thinking strategy to cope with anxiety is used as learners are exposed to inconvenient circumstances. This enables them to eliminate any preoccupation and presumption regarding speaking performance. It is thus associated with "palliative function of suppressing problematic cognitive processes that underlie learners' anxiety," aimed at diverting their attention and thoughts from anxiety-provoking situations to more pleasant situations (Kondo & Ling, 2004). By thinking positively, learners can improve their confidence and be motivated. Once self-confidence is developed, it can influence speech performance with a high rate of fluency. This is supported by Skehan (1998, cited in Nation and Newton, 2009) who maintains that no hesitation in speaking can denote decent speech production in terms of fluency.

Positive thinking strategy is used by learners from both rural and urban schools. According to the closed-ended questionnaire, learners mostly say a prayer to think positively. In the meantime, they hardly use the tactic of considering that English is not so important. Thinking positively is helpful for learners to focus on something pleasant in order to boost self-confidence to perform. Therefore, this strategy can be an alternative to coping with language anxiety.

Conclusion

Studentsare struggling to alleviate foreign language anxiety. This study has shown that factors triggering language anxiety in speaking performance encompass lack of preparation, teaching activities, learner personality and fear of making mistakes. Moreover, anxiety-coping strategies encompass preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking and resignation. Furthermore, the most frequently used strategy amongst urban students is preparation, positive thinking and relaxation, while amongst rural students it consists of sequential relaxation, preparation and positive thinking.

Foreign language anxiety related to speaking tends to recur since the strategies used can only be effective at certain times. If students are forced or asked to speak, their language anxiety will emerge. Consequently, English teachers should allow students to have a silent period before they start to be confident enough to speak in English as forcing them to speak can lead to students' disappointment of their own performance. If they are to perform, the teachers have to assure that students speaking in front of the class or their friends are no embarrassed. Consequently, at this stage of the teaching and learning process it is crucial to have teachers' praise and feedback.

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