

Addressing English Phobia among the Secondary School Students in the Rural Area of Bangladesh

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Abstract

Second / Foreign Language (S/FL) learning efforts always create tremendous mental pressure on the learner. It is never acquired effortlessly like one's native language. Naturally it creates anxiety among the learners which ultimately causes phobia among those who desire to acquire an S/FL. If learners fail to facilitate this anxiety, it increasingly dominates and creates phobia. When this phobia gets severe, learners ultimately give up S/FL learning pursuit. It is a very common phenomenon in Bangladeshi secondary schools especially in the rural areas when they learn English as a foreign language. This study, therefore, investigates the causes behind English phobia among the students of the rural areas of Chittagong, Bangladesh. Here, through this study, I seek to explore the challenges of our learners and to find a solution to this problem. In order to find out the causes behind English phobia, I have used mixed method research. I have used questionnaires as well as arranged interview with the participants with a view to finding out factors that function as impediments to learning English. The analysis of the data shows that the phobia is caused by students' lack of motivation, confidence and aptitude resulting from the inefficient teaching methodologies.

1. Introduction

In Bangladesh English is considered to be Foreign Language (FL). The proficiency in English language is highly valued and honored in Bangladeshi society. English language skill is vitally essential for any prestigious employment in Bangladesh. So, the Government of Bangladesh has always given special emphasis on English language teaching scheme. Observing the poor output of Grammar Translation Method (GTM), our Ministry of Education (MoE) initiated Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach almost two decades ago with a view to making language teaching more effective and fruitful. However, we do not notice any significant sign of advancement in English language learning among our learners. Though CLT advocates learner autonomy, we find that our English class is still teacher centric. Neither the teachers nor the students can comfortably engage themselves in the communicative activities in the English class. Memorization of the answers to the questions is still encouraged by the teachers in our schools. In our schools, English is thought to be a very challenging subject. Majority of students and their guardians take it as threat. It is reported that nervousness engulfs our students in English class. Students suffer from a sort of phobia, more particularly English phobia, in our schools. A good number of students drop out from school as they fail to pass English examinations at Junior School Certificate (JSC) and Secondary School Certificate (SSC). This phobia is more prevalent in the rural areas of Bangladesh where English teaching and learning facility is remarkably poor. As I have studied in rural area (South Chittagong) at my secondary level, I have got some first-hand experience about the grave condition of English teaching in rural schools. Research work is essential to explore the causes of English phobia among our students at secondary level in rural areas. In this study, English phobia means the fear or anxiety the learners have about learning and using English. Here I have attempted to find out the problems responsible for English phobia and suggested solutions to them.

1.1. Background to the Study:

As a student of a rural area of Bangladesh, I had to pass very important ten years of my academic life during my SSC. During my study period, I had seen that most of the students in village schools suffer from severe anxiety. During my school days, whenever I came in touch with the students of different schools, I would observe that students were not interested in English. As a foreign language in our country, English is a very important language and it is important for the students to learn English very well. Without gaining proficiency in English, it is totally impossible to enjoy a prestigious position in life, now-a-days. I choose this area of study with a view to exploring the reasons behind English phobia among the students of rural areas of Bangladesh and to provide a solution to this.

1.2 .Aims and objectives of the study:

I have seen that students are not interested to study English. They want to avoid English in every way they can. During my school days I observed that most students could not accomplish their English homework. They even

did not concentrate on English classes, nor would they want to read any English passages, they were very inattentive to doing any class work and they would not learn their English lessons also. So I want to know the reasons of students' English phobia. My research aims to explore what their problems are and why they totally want to ignore this subject. By ascertaining the causes I intend to suggest the ways which can help the teachers improve the systemic ways of teaching resulting in the reduction of English phobia among the students.

1.3. Significance of the study:

This research, we hope, will help the students to build their confidence. It will be helpful to their parents to assist their kids in reducing their phobia. The findings will also be helpful for the practicing teachers, we believe. We hope the authorities concerned with syllabus design will benefit from this research. They may be informed about the classroom dynamics which may make them aware of the syllabus and teaching materials of English for the students. In brief, we say that it will be useful for the learners, teachers, syllabus and materials designers and education administrators in multifarious ways.

1.4. Research Question:

Q.I: Why do students of the schools of rural areas suffer from English phobia?

Q.II: What can be done to remove English phobia from students?

1.5. Research Problem:

Many researchers worked on the anxiety of the F/SL learners. But in my context where I am carrying out my research so far as my knowledge goes, no study has so far been carried out. This research has been designed with a view to filling up that gap.

2. Review of the literature

In literature, the phobia related works is few. Here, in the following part of this study we will review the literature that deals with phobia and anxiety.

2.1. Phobia:

A phobia is an irrational fear, a kind of anxiety disorder in which the sufferer has a relentless dread of a situation, living creature, place or thing. Individuals with a phobia go to great lengths to avoid a perceived danger which is much greater in their minds than in real life. If confronted with the source of their phobia, the person will suffer enormous distress, which can interfere with their normal function. It can sometimes lead to total panic. For some people, even thinking about their phobia is immensely distressing. A phobia starts when a person begins organizing her/his life around avoiding the object of their fear. A phobia is much more serious than a simple fear. This state of mind gradually creates anxiety. In the subsequent discussion we will attempt to explore the term 'anxiety' as it is a vital component of phobia.

2.2. Anxiety:

Anxiety is a negative way to present human feelings. When we are anxious, we feel nervous, worried, and fearful. We struggle, tremble, perspire, and our hearts beat quickly. In general, anxiety can be defined as a complex concept dependent upon not only on one's feelings of self-efficacy but also appraisals concerning the potential and perceived threats inherent in certain situations. In simple words, anxiety is usually associated with unpleasant feelings and is similar to fear.

Anxiety in communicating in a second language, especially when that language is English, can have a debilitating effect and can influence students' adaptation to the target environment and ultimately their educational goals. There is also agreement that anxiety is related to performance (Balachandran & Skully, 2004; Tobias & Everson, 1997), and that anxiety has been shown to have a debilitating effect on learning and achievement (Gaudy & Spielberger, 1971).

Anxiety is worry or nervous feeling caused by fear about something. It is a psychological affair which is one of the dominant affective factors in language learning. Language learners need to feel secure and to be free of stress before they can focus on the learning task. If it happens otherwise, anxiety swallows up a language learner. It can be divided into three types: a) Trait anxiety b) State anxiety and c) Situation specific anxiety. Scovel (1978) defines trait anxiety as "a more permanent predisposition to be anxious". It is an aspect of personality. State anxiety can be defined as "apprehension that is experienced at a particular moment in time as a response to a definite situation" (Spielberger 1983). It is combination of trait and situation specific anxiety. Situation specific anxiety "consists of the anxiety which is aroused by a specific type of situation or event such as public speaking, examination or class participation" Ellis (1994:480). In Horwitz and Young's (1991) study, it is found that learners frequently experience 'language anxiety', a type of situation specific anxiety associated with attempts to learn a L2 and communicate in it. In this discussion situational anxiety will be focused as it has received considerable attention in SLA.

2.3. Why does a learner experience anxiety?

Perhaps there is hardly any second/ foreign language learner who has not experienced any anxiety while learning that language. During teaching-learning process a number of aspects like the language itself, speaking in front of other learners, behavior of peers, the language class, taking tests, etc. may cause anxiety in a learner. In fact,

language classroom is an inherently face threatening environment. And for this reason, “language mistakes of various sorts abound in learner’s speech and the communicative content is often well below the level of their intellectual maturity” Dornyei (2001:91). Baily (1983) analyzed the dairies of 11 learners and found that they tended to become anxious when they found themselves less proficient in comparison with other learners in the class. She noted an interesting finding that “as the learners perceived themselves becoming more proficient, and therefore better able to compete, their anxiety decreased” Ellis (1984:480). Tests and the learners’ perceived relationship with the teachers are also the source of anxiety which was also revealed in her research. Teachers’ questions are also sometimes threatening and they cause anxiety. From the diarists’ report Ellis and Rathbone (1987) mentioned that teachers’ questions make the learners anxious. Ellis (1989a:257) observes some of the learners’ diaries and reports : “I was quite frightened when asked questions...my mind blocked when asked questions. I fear lest I give wrong answer....will discourage the teacher,...be the laughing stock of the class...”etc.

Anxiety mainly arises relating to the use of the L2 during speaking and listening . It is because learners apprehend that they are quite weak in speaking and listening (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope,1986). Fear or experience of losing oneself can also be the cause of anxiety among the learners. It is also closely related to the idea of cultural shock. Oxford (1992) lists affective states i.e. “emotional regression, panic, anger, self-piety, indecision, sadness, alienation, reduced personality...” are the source of anxiety. From the above discussion we can perceive that communication apprehension, tests, and fear of negative evaluation may breed anxiety. Now let us see what sort of effect anxiety has on learning:

2.4. Effects of anxiety:

From our experience we can say that anxiety has significant damaging impact on learning L2. An anxious learner may be unable to receive information properly and it subsequently effects her/his learning process and finally we find poor performance. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b) point out that anxiety can be hypothesized to effect three stages of the learning process: input, processing and output. Kleinmann (1978) provides evidence to show that Spanish and Arabic speaking learners of English who reported anxiety were less likely to avoid grammatical structures such as infinitive complements and the passive voice than those students who reported no such anxiety. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991a:103) in a comprehensive review include ... “it has been shown that anxiety negatively affects performance in the second language. In some cases, anxiety provides some of the highest simple correlations of attitudes with achievement”.

However, some other researchers found totally different results in their studies. Horwitz (1986) reports mentionable negative correlations between foreign language classroom anxiety and final grade achieved by American university students. Ely (1986a) found no relationship between anxiety and university learners’ level of participation in the class, but the study did show that those learners with a high level of discomfort were less likely to take risks in class, observed by Ellis (1994:479-83).

However, from my observation, I have noticed that anxiety affects a learner in many ways. It makes a learner nervous and gradually the learner loses confidence and subsequently it inhibits learning. It is therefore quite understandable that language anxiety has been recurrently mentioned in the literature as a key factor that reduces motivation and learning. It is common to notice that most children start school life with a great enthusiasm and delight but gradually “many begin to find it anxiety provoking and psychologically threatening” because they find that they are “accountable for responding to their teachers’ questions, completing assignments, and taking tests”, Borphy (1998:82). It is also true that possible danger of public humiliation makes the learners anxious and it detracts them from learning.

2.5. Facilitating and debilitating anxiety:

In order to reduce anxiety, fear and psychological pressure of language learners, classrooms should be made an anxiety free zone, Dornyei (2001) suggests. He argues that “social comparison” that is “excessive emphasis on comparing successful and unsuccessful learners” should be avoided. He also suggests not being too much harsh towards ‘mistakes’. And finally he suggests giving sufficient time to the students during the administration of the tests. All these measures can significantly reduce anxiety from the learners. Anxiety may also be facilitated. It motivates learners to fight new learning task. It generates a sort of mentality among the learners to render additional effort to overcome their feeling of anxiety. However, it commonly occurs in the fairly simple learning tasks.

It should be acknowledged that debilitating anxiety is surely threatening. It forces the learners to flee the learning tasks in order to avoid the source of anxiety. A low-anxiety state is found to have a facilitating function, and high-anxiety state a debilitating effect.

2.6. Reasons behind English Phobia:

Foreign language learning anxiety, particularly English language learning anxiety is usually related with the usage of English language in our context. It can be defined as distinctly complex beliefs, feelings, and behaviors

related to foreign language for communication beyond the classroom.

Anxiety of English among the students is available in our schools. Anxiety is generally defined as “a state of apprehension, a vague fear” (Scovel, 1978:134). It seems difficult to describe in a simple way. It arises from many kinds of sources often associated with particular contexts or situations.

There are various causes of English phobia leading to anxiety. In literature we can find there ten top causes for anxiety in public speaking. They are here –

- Lack of preparation.
- Anxiety is the feeling that the students have either too many points in a short period.
- Sometime students worrying about the audience will be overly critical.
- Public speaking anxiety.
- Students’ try to copy other speakers.
- Anxiety can be the fear of potential negative outcomes
- The next cause is students spend too much time to preparing themselves. They should prepare their confidence level.
- The students dislike in being the centre of attention.
- They have low self-confidence.(Ayres, Schliesman and Sonandre, 1998))

2.7. Ways to tackle English Phobia:

The biggest problem for the students in our school is speaking and writing. The other problems are: our students’ embarrassment, lack of confidence, poor vocabulary, fear and shyness. In Bangladesh, our language teachers view grammar as the first priority for learning a language. Most of them don’t tend to realize the spirit of CLT. They need to motivate the students in language classroom. There are ways to motivate children by following different strategies like-

- Reward is not always meant to be materials; it can be encouraging words also like- “Fantastic work”, “Well done” “Very good” etc.
- The teacher can ask them to bring the most interesting book in the class which can be a motivational and a creative way of making them competitive. It will not mean as force to them.
- The students can be motivated also by group work.
- Interesting and new tasks.
- Changing the classroom arrangements in a new way can help each other and communicate properly.
- Using modern technology and different tools and instruments can be helpful.

These are some ways to encourage the students towards education. These techniques can be adopted in improving all the four skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing. But as the study focuses on speaking and writing only, we can concentrate on some Innovative Teaching Techniques directed to create students’ interests in speaking and writing only.

Some steps that will help learners to build their confidence are- Learners have to practice more and more to learn properly. They can take video/mp3 of their practice session and later they can solve their mistakes. By this way they can motivate themselves to speaking.

If we want to make teaching of reading effective in the classroom, the lesson should be divided into three consecutive phases. They are pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading phases. But it’s important to know that the lessons divided in phases are getting the students’ response properly or not. In Bangladesh as English is a foreign language to the students, it’s more important to give emphasis on teaching strategies and the tasks.

Most important thing about learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is that students must have adequate vocabulary in their mind, otherwise they may find it very difficult to read a text. So, the teacher may introduce word game to the students sometimes. They will learn words by having fun. They can even try to predict the meaning of the word as suggested by Hashey (2003). He said, “When students use the skill of predicting in reading, it helps them to realize the value of picture and word clues. It also helps them to develop higher level thinking about what is going on in the story.”

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Setting of the research:

I have collected data by applying the process of interview and questionnaire. For this reason, I have chosen some participants for my research.

3.1.1. Participants:

I have chosen some participants for collecting data. I have carried out this study in ten schools located in southern Chittagong. The numbers of the participants in questionnaire are forty (40) and ten (10) from these participants have been singled out for both interview and questionnaire. They are students of class 6-10. They are students of different schools located in southern Chittagong. Through convenience or opportunity sample, I have selected the participant for my research.

3.1.2 Description of the sample:

Convenience sampling is the most common sample in research where an important criterion of sample selection is the convenience of the researcher. Through convenience sample the members of the target population are selected for the purpose of the study. Dorneyi,(2007) outlines it for the researchers very clearly.

3.2 Methods:

I have chosen mixed methods for my research. It is necessary to know that there are three kinds of methods for data collection. They are-qualitative method, quantitative method and mixed methods. Qualitative research involves data collection procedures that result primarily in numerical data and quantitative research involves data collection procedures that result primarily in non-numerical but mixed methods research involve different combinations of qualitative and quantitative research either at the data collection or at the analysis levels. Therefore, I have chosen the mixed methods for my research paper.

3.3 Research Instrument:

Because of using mixed methods, we can use the research instrument from both qualitative and quantitative method. Functionally, there are three instruments which are used for research. They are- observation, interview and questionnaire but I have used interview and questionnaire.

3.3. 1 Interview:

It means some general discussions between two people or more than two people. I shall adopt interview as a means of data collection to gather more direct information. Burns (1999:119) maintains “this approach has the advantage of standardizing the interview and therefore ensuring greater consistency and reliability”. An interview is a purposeful conversation between two/more than two people to gather descriptive data in the participants’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights how people make sense of a particular idea (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

There are three kinds of structures of interview. They are-

(i) Structured Interview:

In this format, the researcher follows an elaborate interview schedule/guide. In a word, it is more organized interview structure.

(ii)Unstructured Interview:

The format is open-ended and the interviewee is encouraged to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner.

(iii)Semi –structure interview:

In applied linguistic research, most interviews conducted belong to the Semi –structure interview type, which offers a compromise between the two extremes: Although there is a set of pre- prepared guiding questions and prompts, the format is open-ended and the interviewee is encouraged to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner.

3.3. 2. Questionnaire:

It is not a straightforward task. The form conducts with some formal questions in a question paper and the participants answer the questions (Dorneyi, 2007).

3.4. Developing Research Instrument:

I have prepared ten questions in this questionnaire and collected data from my forty participants. The responses to the questions in the questionnaire require more elaboration, which led me to interview the participants. I have asked 14 questions in my interview. All of my interview questions relate to the first chapter’s three research questions. First six questions aim to bring out the answer to my first research question, second four questions are to bring out the answer to my second research question and last four questions may be to bring out the answer to my third research question.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure:

Between March and July 2015, I visited different schools to collect data. In different visits, I met students of classes from VI to X. Forty (40) of the approached students filled up the questionnaires completely and ten of them were engaged with interview sessions.

3.6. Ethics:

In the study, the participants are aware of their rights. They know they could decline participation and withdraw from the study at any time without showing any reason. They are also aware of that their names would be anonymous in the study.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

4.1. Quantitative Data Presentation and Analysis:

To collect quantitative data, I have used questionnaires in my study. The discussion of my quantitative data is as follows:

4.1.1. Feelings in Classroom:

The statement was about students’ feelings in English classes. 18% of my participants were not in fear when they

were in classroom. About 82% of my participants were in a state of fear in their English classes.

4.1.2. Skills in English:

I have made this statement to know which of the skills they prefer. More than 40% of my participants like writing and 60% of them like Listening skill class.

4.1.3. Language Use in Classroom by Students:

When asked what language the students usually use in classes, the responses revealed that 6% use English and 94% of them use only Bengali for classroom communication.

4.1.4. Language Use in Classroom by Teachers:

When asked what language their teachers commonly use to communicate with them in classes, the data revealed that 86% of their teachers use Bangla and 14% use English.

4.1.5. Anxiety when Learning English:

This statement was made to elicit whether the students fear when they learn English lessons. 73% students of my research participants were unable to prepare their lessons properly because of anxiety or difficulty and other 27% get it prepared by their private tutors.

4.1.6. Feelings after Preparing Lesson:

The result of the collected data in response to the statement that 65% students learn their lesson but couldn't utter in front of teacher because of shyness and 35% could determine how they feel.

4.1.7. Anxiousness in the Classroom

Less than 15% students felt ease in their English classes but more than 80% students were anxious in the classroom.

4.1.8. Vocabulary Level:

In this statement it was found that 20% students have excellent vocabulary knowledge but more than 80% has less knowledge about English vocabulary.

4.2. Qualitative Data Presentation and Analysis:

My qualitative data presentation and analysis comes from the questionnaire and interview.

4.2.1. Classroom Feelings of the Students:

Students are very poor and nervous in their English classes and ultimately they struggle to understand English properly in the classroom. As a consequence, they want to avoid this subject most of the time in the classroom.

4.2.2. Skills liked by the Students:

Students like listening rather than speaking in the classroom.

4.2.3. Language Use in Classroom:

Students and teachers choose Bengali when they talk to each other and this helps them to understand the lesson.

4.2.4. Feelings about Learning Lessons:

This situation was not easy for the students because they could not able to make proper meaning of their lessons and so that they were quite anxious to make their lessons.

4.2.5. Need Syllabus Change?

It was found from the students that their syllabus seems difficult. They think it should change into some easy way for them.

4.2.6: Summary of the Findings:

In response to the first research question my data show that students of different schools of Southern Chittagong have anxiety about English because there are many lacking in their teachers' pedagogical activities, their classroom communication strategies, even in their understanding about CLT. Moreover their syllabus and materials should also be redesigned because it seems difficult for most of the students. Students fear English because the teachers are not serious to give them proper direction to learn English.

4.3. Interview analysis:

I have interviewed 10 teachers of 7 schools which are located in the rural areas of Southern Chittagong. It was a structured interview. I tried to explore the sources of English phobia among the rural students of Bangladesh in the interview. Most teachers reported that students are not motivated and they lack confidence. They acknowledged that the learners suffer from anxiety in English class. Moreover, "the learners are too much shy in their class. They do not like to participate in any pair work or group work", some participants reported. Students "hardly believe that they can prepare their homework or note for exams without teachers' help" two teacher participants stated. "Students cannot imagine that they will not use guide books or note books to prepare themselves for examination. They are too much dependent on coaching and or private tuition", three of the participants expressed.

4.3.1. Recommendation

Here I seek to conclude that teachers of different schools in Southern Chittagong should be more serious in the classrooms. Their friendly gesture can eradicate students' English phobia significantly. They need to motivate the students so that they can realize the importance of English in their future career. Our students lack self-confidence and their teachers can only help them building their confidence.

4.3.2. Limitations:

There are some limitations in my research. My research study has been conducted among only forty participants because of the time constraints. For this reason, my study cannot be generalized. For making it generalized, more participants could be engaged. It would be more reliable if I could have arranged around hundred interviews and seventy to eighty questionnaire surveys for my research project. I think a perfect research project can be carried out if these constraints can be eliminated or at least reduced.

5. Conclusion:

We have found that students of rural areas of Southern Chittagong have English phobia. If the causes of phobia found in the study can be addressed step by step, it can be hoped that English phobia can be reduced to a large extent. It is felt that students need encouragement, motivation and confidence which their teachers only can boost significantly. Teachers' role to reduce learners' foreign language learning anxiety is also of great importance to eradicate English phobia. However, socioeconomic condition of the learners is also a vital issue in this affair.

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