

INVESTIGATING FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY (FLA) AMONG THAI STUDENTS LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to investigate foreign language anxiety (FLA) among Thai students studying English as a foreign language in a university in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, Malaysia. The study was designed to determine how foreign language anxiety influences the process of learning a new foreign language. Besides that, this study was conducted to study the types of anxiety experienced by the students and the strategies used to cope with their anxiety. Hundred and eight students were involved in completing a structured questionnaire. These students were learning English as a foreign language and they were already fluent in their LI and were also using Bahasa Melayu as their second language. A 3 Likert scale questionnaire ranging from disagree to agree, was employed. It was divided into three sections which included demographic details, foreign language anxiety and strategies used to overcome the anxiety. The findings revealed that despite having learnt Bahasa Melayu as their second language, majority of the students still experienced some level of language anxiety. The findings indicate a natural response that is these students experienced some level of foreign language anxiety symptoms every time they learn a new foreign language. Nevertheless, the students were able to overcome their anxiety through various strategies.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety; Strategies; Bilingual Learners

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kebimbangan mempelajari bahasa asing dalam kalangan pelajar Thai yang sedang mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa asing di sebuah universiti di Kota Bharu, Kelantan, Malaysia. Kajian ini direkabentuk untuk menentukan bagaimana kebimbangan mempelajari bahasa asing itu mempengaruhi proses mempelajari sesuatu bahasa asing. Selain itu, kajian ini dijalankan untuk mengetahui strategi yang digunakan pelajar bagi mengatasi kebimbangan mempelajari bahasa asing. Seratus lapan orang pelajar mengambil bahagian dalam menjawab soal selidik berstruktur. Pelajar-pelajar ini sedang mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa asing kerana mereka telahpun mahir di dalam bahasa ibunda mereka serta menggunakan Bahasa Melayu sebagai bahasa kedua. Kajian ini juga bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti punca atau penyebab kepada rasa kebimbangan ini. Satu soal selidik menggunakan Skala Likert 3 tahap telah digunakan untuk tujuan ini. Ia terbahagi kepada tiga bahagian iaitu maklumat latar belakang pelajar, kebimbangan mempelajari bahasa asing dan juga strategi untuk mengawal kebimbangan mempelajari bahasa baru. Dapatan menunjukkan walaupun pelajar tersebut sudah mempelajari Bahasa Melayu sebagai bahasa kedua, kebanyakan mereka masih mempunyai tahap kebimbangan mempelajari bahasa asing yang berbeza. Walaubagaimanapun, pelajar tersebut Berjaya mengambil beberapa langkah untuk mengatasi tahap kebimbangan mereka melalui pelbagai strategi.

Kata kunci: Kebimbangan Mempelajari Bahasa Asing; Strategi: Bilingual

Introduction

More than half of students who learn a foreign language will experience some kind of anxiety in their learning (Worde, 1998) and it is this language anxiety which may contribute to potential problems for students in the language classroom (Kondo & Ling 2004). This explains why learning English as a second/foreign/another (ESL/EFL/EAL) language is not an easy task as language anxiety is bound to be experienced by the students. The term foreign language anxiety is defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically in second language context, including speaking, listening, reading and writing (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). Language anxiety is also referred to as the fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993). This type of anxiety is linked directly to performing in the target language, therefore it is not regarded as a general performance anxiety (Gardner & MacIntyre 1993; Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). Instead, it is considered as crucial in a learning process as language anxiety ranks high among factors influencing language learning, regardless of the setting being formal or informal.

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) further explained that when anxiety is limited to the scope of language learning situation, it falls into the category of specific anxiety reaction; differentiate from the anxiety experienced by people who are generally anxious in a

variety of situations. Specific anxiety reaction refers to language learning students who generally feel strongly that anxiety is a major obstacle to be overcome in learning a foreign language. This type of anxiety is prompted by a specific set of conditions for example public speaking or participating in classroom activities (Ellis, 2005). This is unique in that it occurs specifically in the foreign language context, which in this case refers to the process of learning English language.

Learning a language is already a complex process by nature. Learners go through various processes and steps before acquiring the target language. Along these processes, learners are faced by many internal and external factors which may contribute positively and negatively towards the overall process. One of the factors is the feeling of anxiety which sometimes may arise in response to a particular situation or event which can be considered to be a major character trait. Language anxiety can start as transitory episodes of fear in a situation in which the student has to perform in the target language, at this time anxiety is simply a passing state (Arnold, J. 1999).

Although researchers have found that language anxiety may be overcome over time as shown in studies conducted by Desrochers and Gardner (1981), it does not decrease overtime for all students if repeated occurrences cause students to associate anxiety with language performance. This is when language anxiety becomes a trait rather than a state (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993). Once language anxiety has evolved into a lasting trait, it can have pervasive effects on language learning and performance. Thus, there is a constant need to investigate and study the influence of anxiety in the language learning to ensure students acquire language with minimum difficulties.

Problem Statement

It is not common for many educators and academicians to experience the frustrations of having to deal with learners and students who are silent in the language classrooms, despite the students' levels of proficiencies. It is evident when they seldom volunteer to participate in answering questions, give their opinion or initiate communication; regardless with the teachers or among themselves. According to Bahiyah (1992), among the several possible reasons behind this phenomena include; the students feeling insecure of their level of English. Therefore they prefer to say little or nothing at all for fear that their mistakes would make their classmates or teacher laugh or look down on them. Hence, students who feel anxious in their foreign language classroom may find their lesson to be less enjoyable (Gregerson, 2005 cited in Golchi & Jamali, 2011:186). As a result, this may affect the students' achievement because in foreign language learning, students' active involvement and participation are essential for them to be successful.

In the context of this study, Thailand learners learning English at the Sultan Salehudin Islamic International College (pseudonym), are required to pass their English language exam. However, observation has shown that these Thai learners face difficulties in the English classroom. They show lack of motivation and participation in class activities. Among the reasons given by the majority of Thai learners are: lack of confidence and the difficulties of the English language itself.

Looking back at these learners' status as a bilingual, this phenomena should not arise since they have already experienced similar process of acquiring a foreign language before when they learned Bahasa Melayu as their second language. Does this mean that factors such as language anxiety still exist and that the past experience of learning a foreign language (in this context Bahasa Melayu) does not contribute in reducing the anxiety of the students?

This has led to the purpose of the study presented in this article. Although a number of researches on language anxiety in schools and university levels have been conducted, there is still a lack of information as how language anxiety is experienced by learners with prior experience of learning a foreign language. Most language anxiety studies focused more on second language acquisition. In addition, there is still a lack of studies on investigating the strategies employed to overcome the language anxiety. Based on the above problem statements, the research questions for this study therefore were:

- a) What are the factors that the Thai students considered as contributors to their foreign language anxiety in learning English?
- b) What are the strategies used by the Thai students to overcome their foreign language anxiety when learning English?

Literature Review – Language Anxiety

Generally, the term anxiety can be related to 'threats to self-efficacy and appraisals of situations as threatening' (Papamihel, 2002) or a situation of an uneasy feeling due to something threatening (Koba et al, 2000). Meanwhile, the term language anxiety is defined as a "distinctive complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the

uniqueness of the language process” (Horwitz et al 1986:128), different from other types of anxiety and is specific to foreign language learning situations (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a, 1991b).

An anxious person tends to focus on self-directed, derogatory cognition rather than focusing on the task itself which may interrupt the whole learning process of a second language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Tobias (1986) explained on how anxiety may interfere with the input, processing and output stages of language learning. Anxiety may shorten the span of one’s attention at the input stage and therefore the learner is unable to grasp the overall information which is required to enter the next stage; the processing stage. In this second stage, the effect of anxiety depends on the structure of the task. If the task is easy and straight-forward, the level of anxiety in a learner may not be high. This is supported by Spielberger (1996) who mentioned that anxiety and reinforcement do not have any effect on performance when the learner has adequate ability to perform a certain task. It is when the task given becomes harder and more complicated that the anxiety has greater effects on the learner’s capability in performing the required task. In the final stage, anxiety may interfere with the recovery of information which has been learned previously in the early stage which may manipulate the out and production of the whole language learning process.

There are several possible factors that may contribute to the occurrence of foreign language anxiety among learners of the second language. Horwitz et al. (1986), Pappamihel (2002) and Casado and Dereshiwsky (2004) have suggested that learners may feel anxious due to: communication apprehension that happens when students face difficulties in understanding teacher’s instructions, negative evaluation which refers to the fear of correction and making mistakes and lastly a wide-range feeling of anxiety which in this case refer to not getting good grades or even failing the subject. Onwuegbuzi, Bailey and Daley (2000) also suggested that students with low ability in skills such as oral and writing in their first language may contribute to the possibility of experiencing a higher foreign language anxiety.

Besides the students’ themselves, it is also the teachers’ responsibility to ensure that the students have low anxiety in order for a smooth language learning process to be conducted. Since there is a two-way communication method happening in language classroom, Worde (1998) explained that teacher’s unsuitable method of teaching and the wide gap between teachers and students is considered one of the possible factors that contribute to the learner’s level of anxiety in learning a second language. Therefore, as suggested by Onwuegbuzi (2000), teachers should also be on the outlook and always be aware that learners can easily become anxious especially when learning a foreign language. Thus, teachers should focus more on maximizing their teaching methods and relationship with the students to avoid anxiety from occurring. Furthermore, he also suggested that teachers need to show an optimistic behaviour, give moral support, empathy and reinforcement towards the students in their learning process of acquiring a foreign language. This can only be done if the teachers themselves constantly reflect and improve their teaching skills from time to time.

There are other strategies in overcoming language anxiety. Bailey et al. (1999) identified avoidance is often used by learners experiencing language anxiety when learning a foreign language. Similarly, Pappamihel (2002), in his study on investigating the language anxiety of ESL students in America, avoidance strategy was found to be the most common strategy used by the students. The strategy was seen to be used by the students by not speaking during class. Kondo and Ling’s (2004, 2006) studies on 373 and 209 learners respectively, studying English as a foreign language in universities in Japan. They identified five categories of general strategies which are known as preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking and resignation. Ardi Marwan (2007) collected information from 77 learners of both lower and upper intermediate level studying English from several universities in Indonesia. All the respondents were requested to answer an open-ended questionnaire and were asked to write down the specific strategies they used to deal with their foreign language anxiety. The findings showed that there are four strategies which learners used in overcoming their foreign language anxiety. These strategies include preparation, relaxation, positive thinking and peer seeking. Among the strategies listed in the findings, one strategy (the resignation strategy) was not used by learners to overcome their anxiety problem. In another study by Keiko Iizuka (2010) it was revealed that the learners used positive strategies when experiencing language anxiety in the English classroom. These positive strategies include being well-prepared, making an effort and asking other classmates for help. At the same time, there are also a few negative strategies reported such as giving up, ignoring, avoiding and distancing oneself from difficult situations.

It may be summarized from the review of literature that there are three related performance anxieties that are associated with foreign language anxiety within an academic and social context. They are: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension is a type of anxiety or shyness which is characterized by fear or anxiety about communicating with people. This includes difficulty in speaking in groups or in public or listening to a spoken message (this is called receiver anxiety). Thus, it is believed that people who have trouble speaking in groups are likely to experience greater difficulty in learning a foreign language where communication situation is constantly happening and their performance is observed.

In a language learning classroom, especially learning English as a foreign language, performance evaluation is an ongoing feature, thus test-anxiety refers to a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure. Students who are considered test-anxious when learning foreign language will probably experience considerable difficulty since tests and quizzes are frequent and even students with low anxiety often make errors and mistakes in tests. The third anxiety is called the fear of negative evaluation which is defined as “apprehension about others’ evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectations that others would evaluate oneself negatively” (Watson & Friend, 1969). The context of fear of negative evaluation is broader because it may occur in any social and evaluative situation. Despite some researchers may describe the term foreign language anxiety is resulted from the three types of anxieties, Horwitz et al (1986) suggested that “foreign language anxiety is a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p.128).

This study looked into four factors that may contribute to language anxiety; communication apprehension, test anxiety, negative evaluation and anxiety caused by the learning situation such as classroom environment as proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986). The strategies used by these learners in coping with their foreign language anxiety will also be examined. The types of strategies used as a reference in this study are taken from Konda and Ling (2004). namely, preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking and resignation.

The preparation category refers to the students’ efforts to overcome their feeling of anxiety by improving their learning strategies. The second category which is relaxation deals with the methods to reduce the symptoms of anxiety. The next category is called positive thinking refers to the efforts to “divert attention from stressful situation to positive and pleasant cues and bring relief to the anxious students”(p.262). Peer seeking category is the effort to consult other learners who are also anxious in learning the foreign language. The last category is the resignation category which refers to the unwillingness of the learners to lessen their anxiety by avoiding the learning process. These are presented in the following conceptual framework of this study.

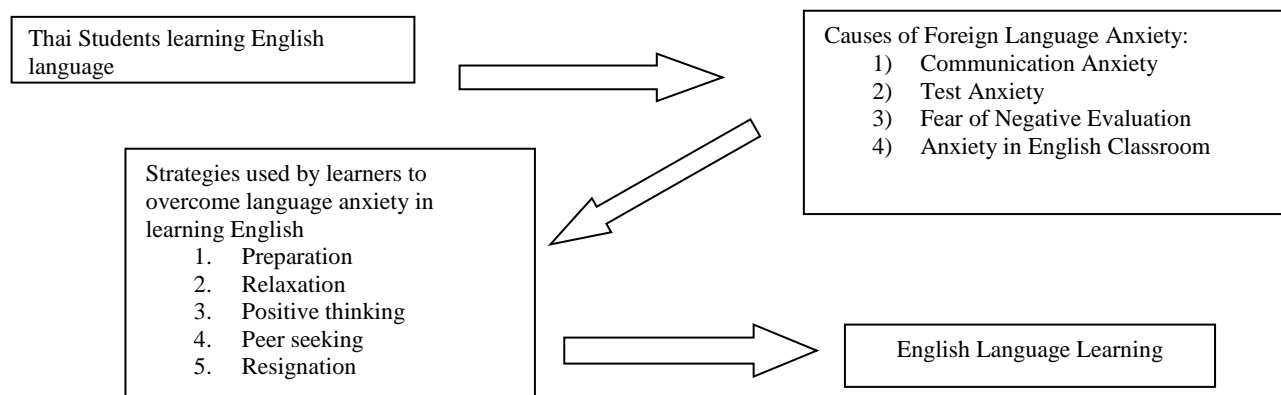


Figure 1: Foreign Language Anxiety and Strategies as Predictors of Language Learning

[Adapted from Horwitz et al.(1986) and Kondo & Ling (2004)]

Research Design

The questionnaire employed in this study was adopted from the instrument used by Marwan (2007) which investigated both the causes of foreign language anxiety and the strategies used to overcome the anxiety. The questionnaire with a Likert-scale ranging from disagree to agree, has three sections which included demographic details, foreign language anxiety and strategies used to overcome the anxiety. It consists of 20 items pertaining to the causes of foreign language anxiety and 15 items on the types of strategies used to overcome the anxiety.

A pilot study was conducted on 50 Thai students in order to examine the internal reliability of the instrument. The findings demonstrated internal reliability, achieving an alpha coefficient of 0.649 for items measuring anxiety factors and 0.596 for the items measuring strategies in overcoming foreign language anxiety. Despite the best score for alpha coefficient is 0.8, any score above 0.5 is still acceptable and therefore the instrument was interpreted as reliable and valid to be employed in this study.

A total of 108 Thailand students took part in this study. These students are from Pattani, Thailand who speak Thai language as their mother tongue and Bahasa Melayu as their second language. The questionnaires were distributed to the 108 students by the teachers. Interviews were also conducted with the English teachers, in order to have a better understanding of the students and their progress in learning English. According to the teachers, despite having past experience of acquiring a foreign language before, these students are seen to have difficulties in acquiring English in the classroom.

The questionnaires were later collected and were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics and graphs were used to display the data. Before the data were analysed, the items in the questions were grouped according to the factors and strategies they intended to measure. The grouping was carried out through hierarchical cluster analysis and as a result, five groups of factors and strategies were identified.

Findings

Factors of Foreign Language Anxiety among Thai learners

Based on the means score, findings show that the most dominant factors of foreign language anxiety among the students was the fear of failing the class with a mean score of 2.75, followed by fear of making mistakes and difficulties in understanding teachers' medium of instructions, both with the same mean score of 2.59. For lack of preparation and lack of confidence, their mean scores were 2.52 and 2.17 respectively. The following table shows the mean scores and standard deviation for the respective factors measured.

Table 1: Foreign language anxiety factors

Foreign Language Anxiety	Mean	std
Lack of confidence	2.173	.352
Lack of preparation	2.521	.460
Fear of failing the class	2.750	.322
Fear of making mistakes	2.591	.361
Difficulties in understanding teachers medium of instructions	2.591	.361

Strategies in Overcoming Foreign Language Anxiety among Thai Learners

In order to investigate the strategies used by these Thai students in overcoming their language anxiety in learning English language as a foreign language, a descriptive analysis was used to interpret the data collected. The descriptive analysis results are presented in the tables which display the mean scores and the standard deviation for each construct. The total mean for each construct was categorized into three categories namely; agree, uncertain and disagree as in the table below.

The results for the strategies used to overcome language anxiety by these Thai students show that all students (100%) agreed that preparation was the most used strategy to overcome the language anxiety. This was followed by the second highest strategy which is positive thinking (97.22%), and peer seeking third with 96.29%. The relaxation strategy was chosen by 87.03% of the students. On the other hand, half of the students (53.70%) considered the strategy resignation was one of the strategies to overcome the language anxiety while 46.29% of the students disagree with the resignation strategy as a method to reduce language anxiety when learning a foreign language.

Table 2 below shows the dominant strategies in overcoming language anxiety among Thai students when learning English language as a foreign language. Based on the data collected and the mean scores shown in Figure 3, the positive thinking strategy has the highest mean score of 2.63, followed by preparation strategy with a mean score of 2.53, relaxation strategy (mean=2.24), peer seeking strategy (mean=2.21) and finally the lowest mean score of 1.57 is the resignation strategy.

Table 2: Strategies in Overcoming Language Anxiety among Students

Strategies In Overcoming Anxiety	Mean	Standard Deviation
Preparation	2.53	.308

Relaxation	2.24	.620
Positive thinking	2.63	.465
Peer seeking	2.21	.317
Resignation	1.57	.542

Discussion

Factors of Foreign Language Anxiety among Thai Learners

Based on the findings, the results show that these Thai learners mostly experience foreign language anxiety in their English classroom. Among the major factors contributing to language anxiety are factors like fear of failing the class and making mistakes as well as lack of preparation. The survey reveals that lack of confidence is the least factor which contributed to language anxiety among the students. This contradicts to the findings in the study carried out by Marwan (2007) where lack of confidence was one of the highest factors reported which contribute to language anxiety in Marwan's participants.

Besides that, the students considered failing the class as one of the most contributing factors which lead to language anxiety. This finding is supported by other studies conducted by Pappamihel (2002) and Marwan (2007) where participants in both studies also agreed that the factor is one of the highest contribution factors in language anxiety. This could possibly because of the learners learning English in this university are required to pass the English examination in order for them to move on to their major subjects and finally to graduate. Thus, the pressure and the focus are more given by the students in ensuring that they pass their English subject.

Strategies in Overcoming Language Anxiety among Thai Learners

Five strategies - preparation, relaxation, positive, peer seeking and resignation were explored in this study as categorised by Kondo and Ling (2004). In contrast to the study done by Marwan (2007) where the participants did not use the resignation strategy, the Thai learners in the current study used all the strategies including resignation strategy. However, the resignation strategy was reported to be the lowest preferred strategy by the Thai learners. Only 58 students out of 108 participants agreed to the resignation strategy as another means of reducing their anxiety. Although other studies, the last strategy was the least preferred by language learners, the findings of this study supports findings by Bailey et al (1999) and Pappamihel (2002).

Implication and Recommendations

First and foremost, this research is deemed important as it gives light to educators and teachers in the education field to be more interested and aware of the causes and strategies in overcoming language anxiety so that these educators and teachers can create a better and more comfortable language learning environment to ensure that language anxiety is reduced to ensure a smooth language learning process both in terms of the income and outcome. On the other hand, any research will always be limited by a number of constraint factors. There are a few constraints face when conducting this research. The first constraint is the limitation of sample size. The number of participants is quite small in proportion of the target population which the researcher intended to have. In addition, this study is carried out in only one higher institution in Kota Bharu, Kelantan and it does not provide appropriate data to represent most university students in Malaysia. In addition to that, the study investigates the language anxiety faced by Thai learners learning English as a foreign language in Malaysia only and therefore does not represent each and every foreign learners learning English as a foreign language in all higher institution in Malaysia.

Several implications may be gathered from this study. They are related to the students, teachers as well as environment. First this study implies that despite being bilingual, these Thai students still experience language learning anxiety when learning English as a foreign language. It should not be taken for granted that previous experience would help overcome new learning experiences. It also implies that all experiences are new and different in their own ways. Therefore, teachers or educators should be prepared to help students overcome this anxiety.

Second, there are strategies that students employ to overcome their anxiety. Therefore teachers/educators need to identify these strategies and use them to help enhance students' foreign language learning. Teachers/educators could also introduce other strategies

that students could employ. This also indicates that the foreign language teaching approaches employed by teachers/educators should match the strategies students employ in overcoming their anxiety.

Finally, as anxiety can be overcome, there is a need to create an environment which helps students overcome it faster/easier. It is natural for one to have some feeling of fear in situations that is not familiar to him or her. However, this is always overcome when one becomes familiar with the situation. Familiarity means more exposure or getting used to the situation. Hence, in the context of foreign language learning, one needs to be familiar with the language as well as the context of the language learning process. In other words, one needs to know the target language and be at ease with the language. This could be achieved by making the language familiar to the students by the teachers/educators through a conducive foreign language environment as well as by students through frequent use of the language.

These implications also imply that more studies should be conducted with larger population or different foreign students (for example, Singaporean, Philippines or Japanese foreign students). Besides that, differences between gender and year of studies should be looked into as factors contributing to language anxiety. These will add to a better understanding of the language learning anxiety and how to overcome it.

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Appendix

This survey is conducted in order to elicit data on “**The Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) among students learning English as a foreign language**”. All information will be kept confidential and will only be used for the purpose of this study only. Kindly complete all the sections and fill in the spaces provided. Your cooperation is highly appreciated. Thank you.

Part 1: Demographic Background

Gender: Male / Female

Age: _____

Faculty/Course: _____

Year of Study: _____

Nationality: _____

Mother Tongue (First Language): _____

Second Language: _____

Third Language: _____

Part 2: Language Anxiety in Learning English

Please read each statement below carefully and tick the appropriate choices.

Note: Tick (/) only one option for each item in the questionnaire.

No.	Item	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class			
2	I don't worry about making mistakes in my English class			
3	I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in my English class			
4	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the English class			
5	I am glad if the teacher corrects my English when I am speaking			
6	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in my English class			
7	I worry about the consequences of failing my English class			
8	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class			
9	I don't get upset when I am corrected by the teacher while I am speaking			
10	Even if I am well prepared for my English class, I feel anxious about it			
11	I feel confident when I speak in my English class			
12	I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make			
13	I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in my English class			
14	I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students			
15	I am not afraid of getting a fail mark in my English class			
16	I am nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says			
17	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I make mistakes			
18	I get nervous when I come to the English class with little preparation			
19	I don't have any problems in understanding the teacher's words when speaking in English			
20	I feel embarrassed when I don't say English words correctly			
21	I feel very bad if I fail my English class			

Part 3: Measuring Anxiety Coping Strategies

No.	Items	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree
1	I try to make a habit of studying English everyday			
2	I try to relax when I am in my English class			
3	I imagine myself giving a great performance			
4	I tell myself that others must also be anxious			
5	I stop paying attention when I am feeling nervous in the class			

6	I never care to prepare for my English class			
7	I don't think trying to feel relaxed helps me overcome my anxiety			
8	I tell myself that I am ok when I feel anxious in my English class			
9	I never tell myself that difficult problems for me are also difficult for others			
10	I don't want to participate in the class			
11	I ask students around me if they understand the class			
12	I study hard the day before I have my English class			
13	I take a deep breath when I feel anxious in my English class			
14	I try not to think of people around me			
15	I avoid getting involved in a situation which can make me feel anxious			

a) Do you experience anxiety (feelings such as anxious, shy, nervous, etc.) whenever you learn a new foreign language?

b) What do you do to overcome the feeling of anxiety when learning a new foreign language?
