

The Connection between Linguistic Errors and Anxiety in Language

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ABSTRACT

Ability to use language appropriately makes communication effective and meaningful. However, anxiety can impact classroom communication negatively. This paper aims to contribute to the research on language anxiety (LA) by investigating the extent to which the trait contributes to linguistic errors during class presentations by students learning English as a second language. Students at secondary school are likely to experience some degree of anxiety during language lessons. The current research explores the LA levels during class presentations and also interrogates the relationship between anxiety and the frequency of linguistic errors. The data on language anxiety levels was obtained through the participants filling a questionnaire adapted from the foreign language anxiety scale (FLAS). A voice recorder was used to record the class presentations from which linguistic errors that the learners' made were isolated. Descriptive statistics and content analysis were used to analyze the data. The results indicate a weak negative correlation between the level of language anxiety and frequency of errors in the class presentations.

Keywords: Language anxiety, linguistic errors, language learning, classroom communication.

Introduction

In the Kenyan education system, the language policy stipulates that English is an official language alongside Kiswahili. Students are also supposed to learn English as one of the key subjects from primary school. Moreover, English is the main medium of communication during the teaching/ learning process in upper primary school and also one of the key subjects in the curriculum from form one to form four (Ongechi, 2003). Despite the subject taking such a key position in the education system, learners experience anxiety during English lessons. This may be attributed to learners' psychological dispositions and levels of state anxiety and also the fact that the language is

‘foreign’ to the students. The language anxiety theory by Horwitz, et al. (1986) has provided evidence for an undesired relationship between anxiety and language performance. Errors are a common occurrence in communication and language learning. Corder (1983) asserts that errors of linguistic performance are characteristically unsystematic and it may not be easy to predict their occurrence.

Learners may also exhibit errors that are related to second language competence. These errors may be phonological, morphological or syntactic and they reveal learners’ knowledge or transitional competence in the second language at a given point in time. Several factors have been cited as the source of error in spoken language. These include partial application of rules, new language experiences, translation difficulties and overgeneralization (Norrish, 1983). Existing research on language anxiety has focused on causes, impact and management of this trait (Croucher, M., 2013; Madonsela, S., 2015; Tran & Moni, 2015; Mladenka, Sawyer & Behnke, 1998). Studies on the relationship between language anxiety and frequency of errors are limited. Understanding this relationship will highlight the importance of managing the anxiety to ensure the students’ presentations during language learning are done effectively. It will also add to the existing research on language anxiety. The research questions informing this study were:

- a) What are the language anxiety levels for different students during class presentations?
- b) What is the relationship between language anxiety levels and the frequency of errors?

Literature Review

Language as Communication

Akmajian et al. (1990) observed that the field of linguistics more or less expounds the salient issues related to language and communication. Human beings mainly share ideas and relay messages through linguistic texts and utterances. Addler & Rodman (2003) highlight various types of communication which include interpersonal communication, public communication and mass communication. Interpersonal communication takes place between individuals and it may involve discussion or consultation on a certain topic. This type of communication takes place in various settings such as institutions, homes and public places like airports and bus stations. Mass communication involves an audience that is relatively large and anonymous to the source. The transmission of the message in this type of communication is automated as seen in electronic media such radio and television. Public communication on the other hand occurs when the group is large and individuals make presentations on a given topic in turns. Public speeches and class presentations fall under this category. This study was based on communication and language use in a classroom set up. The study focused on syntactic and morphological aspects of the class presentations. Students with low levels of anxiety usually perform better in language activities (Woodrow, 2006). Research has indicated that there is negative association between proficiency and language anxiety levels (Ehsan, 2013). It can therefore be inferred that high levels of anxiety may inhibit performance during language learning. Students with excessive anxiety may opt for simple grammatical structures as they make their presentations.

Language and Communication Anxiety

Communication apprehension is defined as the fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person/persons (Wrench et al., 2008). Individuals with high CA tend to avoid communicating with others and also speak less. As such, they may be perceived negatively (Pearson & Paul 2003). Sellnow (2003) identifies the following types of CA: trait like communication apprehension, audience based communication apprehension and context based apprehension. Individuals with trait like communication apprehension are likely to be nervous in all speech situations while audience based apprehension is determined by the type of audience being addressed. Speakers who experience context based CA are anxious about communicating in a particular physical or situational context. It is worthwhile to note that communication is part of language learning as the learner and the instructor present ideas and provide feedback respectively. Excessive apprehension is likely to compromise the process of classroom communication. On the other hand, students with minimal anxiety are able to articulate their ideas better. Jaffe (2004) observes that a speaker can plan a compelling introduction to counteract the anxiety peak at the beginning of the speech. Gregory (2005) indicates that at the planning stage, a speaker should choose a topic which they know a great deal about. Sellnow (2003) cites other ways of reducing anxiety which include systematic desensitization, cognitive restructuring and skills training. In other words, the CA can be managed through adopting a relaxed mindset, positive self-talk and training. Another cure to excessive nervousness is experience which is earned through practice (Turk, 1985). On a broad perspective, anxiety during language learning can be addressed from the CA theory. To enhance classroom communication, learners should be advised to accept the anxiety as normal (McDougal, 2007).

Secondly, it is important to analyze the anxiety as specifically as possible so as to identify the root cause. Training, preparation and avoiding negative thoughts about the speaking situation will also go a long way in the management of apprehension during language learning. Language anxiety is part of general kinds of situational anxieties related to oral expression and personal communication (Osnat & Salim, 2002). Horwitz et al., (1986) refer to it as a distinctive complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning. LA can also be viewed as a trait referring to the personality of an individual reacting in a nervous manner when speaking in the second language (Gardner and Macintyre, 1993). In the current study, LA is viewed as subset of general communication apprehension. The former is related to general communication contexts whereas language anxiety touches specifically on the affective factors during language learning. Ehsan (2013) affirms that there is moderate to high negative associations between language anxiety and language proficiency. High anxiety learners are likely to have lower language scores as compared to those learners with low anxiety. Onwuegbzie et al., (2000) examined the extent to which cognitive, affective, personality and demographic variables predict language acquisition. Cognitive and affective factors had the largest impact in language achievement. This confirms that anxiety plays a significant role in language learning and achievement. A series of studies

have been conducted to assess the various dimensions of anxiety in the language classroom. The areas of concern have been the causes, impact and how the issue can be managed. Tran et al., (2013) investigated how anxiety developed in students of English as a foreign language. The findings indicated that students learned to be anxious as a result of teaching methods, assessment, students' teacher relationships and curriculum structure. In the Kenyan context, English language is key language in the social and educational set up. It is in fact one of the official languages and it is taken as a second language.

However, the factors informing LA in the teaching of English in the secondary schools are more or less related to the ones given above. The language of instruction can be a factor in language anxiety. Learners who are learning in a second language for the first time may experience some anxiety because the language is foreign to them (Madonsela, 2015). When learners are allowed to use a language of their choice during the learning process, they seem to participate more actively. On the other hand, when the teacher takes a firm stance on language to be used during classroom communication, the learners are likely to feel limited concerning the language choice during the lesson. They will also experience some anxiety if they are called upon to make a presentation. Santos et al., (2015) carried out a study on communicative anxiety in English as a third language. The main focus of the above study was the link between proficiency, certification, multilingualism and anxiety. The results indicated a significant relationship between the variables above and anxiety levels. Learners who are proficient in more than one language are likely to experience lower levels of anxiety. In the Kenyan linguistic scenario, multilingualism is evident with learners inclining to the use of Kiswahili and the first language. English takes the third position. Consequently, class presentations in a form three English language class may be a source of anxiety for students. Tran & Moni (2015) investigated students and teachers perspectives and experiences of managing FLA.

The findings suggest an optimal approach to the management of language anxiety whereby the efforts should not only focus on reducing the negative effects but also work towards making the most of its positive effects. According to Tran & Moni, FLA management should also be inclusive by involving teachers, students, family and other relevant stakeholders. From the foregoing, anxiety during language learning is inevitable. However, the trait can be managed to ensure it does not counter language learning. A number of factors are likely to aggravate language anxiety levels. According to Tran et al., (2013), students learn to be anxious. The anxiety can result from teaching methods, tests, assessment, student teacher relationships and curriculum structures. Other factors that are likely to facilitate this trait include competition with other students, endeavor for a certain goal and worry about test scores (Tran & Moni, 2015). It is within the scope of this study to discuss how these causative factors can be mitigated for effective communication in the language classroom.

Affective Filter Hypothesis

This is one of the key theoretical models that inform this study. It states that affective factors relate to the second language acquisition process (Krashen, 1987). Research has confirmed that variables such as motivation, self-confidence and anxiety

determine the success in language acquisition. Learners who are highly motivated and have minimal anxiety levels are likely to perform better in language activities. According to Krashen's theory, the affective variables act as a filter in the language acquisition process. Negative factors such as anxiety can be viewed as a negative component which inhibits the acquisition language structures. An adaptation of this model presents the negative affective factors as a barrier which inhibits output during language learning. Overly anxious students will not be able to make presentations that are at the level of their linguistic competence.

Errors in English Language Learning and Use

Carr (1998) observes that to err and to speak are each uniquely human. Various studies have been undertaken to establish the types and extent of errors in various contexts of language learning and use. Research on this topic spans decades with Corder (1974) providing the foundational framework of studying and analysing the errors. Much of the research examines errors in students spoken and written work. Njoroge (1996) conducted a research on the morpho- syntactic errors in the written English of first year undergraduate students in Kenya. The sample for the study was drawn from the first year students of English in Kenyatta University. Errors in the following grammatical categories were identified: verb phrase, noun phrase, prepositional phrase, adjective phrase, adverb phrase, complementation, word order, concord, clause link and negation. It is imperative after studying the presence of errors to explain the possible causes. The current study sought to explain whether affective factors such as anxiety contribute to errors. Ayoo (2004) studied the morph syntactic errors in the written English of primary eight hearing impaired pupils. The study revealed that the written English of the hearing impaired has various morph- syntactic errors, especially related to the verb. The study also showed that the partially deaf have better English than the profoundly deaf. Maina (2010) studied the morphological and syntactic errors in the spoken English of form two students. The sample in this study was more representative because it was drawn from a population of students at a more general level of language learning. At the secondary level, learning English language is compulsory while at the university level it is an elective subject. In the above study, the most prevalent errors were verb phrase and noun phrase errors. The prepositional, adjectival and adverbial errors were minimal.

Another dimension of this research involves studies on errors in teacher language (Waweru, 2003). The cited study examined the lexical and phonological errors in the spoken English of pre- school teachers. Error analysis approach was used within the theoretical construct of inter language to identify and classify the errors observed. The analysis revealed inappropriate use of lexical items and mispronunciation of words. Error analysis involves the systematic interpretation of the unacceptable forms used by someone learning a language (Crystal, 2010). According to Schacter & Marianne (1977), trained language teachers have applied EA to one degree or another. They have studied their students' recurring errors, classified them into categories, and used them as the basis for preparing lessons designed to remediate such errors. Corder (2010) indicates that

errors are likely to emerge when learners make the wrong deduction about the nature of L2 such as assuming that a pattern is general when there are exceptions. The other cause of error may be transfer from the first language to the target language. In the current study, the researcher sought to interrogate whether anxiety contributes to increase of errors in learners' presentations. Corder (1981) distinguishes between systematic and unsystematic errors. The systematic errors are a reflection of the learner's linguistic competence. Njoroge (1996) gives other categories that can be adopted for the classification of errors. They include noun phrase, verb phrase, prepositional phrase, word order, adjectival, adverbial, complementation, clause link, agreement and negation errors.

According to Corder (1974), error recognition and analysis involves:

- a) Selection of a corpora language
- b) Identification of errors in the corpus
- c) Classification of the errors identified
- d) Explanation of possible causes
- e) Evaluation and implication

This framework was useful in highlighting the errors during the learners' presentations. It was also instrumental in classifying the errors identified and placing them in appropriate categories.

Methodology

Participants

This research worked with students in the third year of their secondary school (form three). The class was appropriate because at this level, the learners are conversant with speeches and class presentations which formed the basis of the research. The researcher randomly selected eight schools from the list of twenty two schools provided by the education office. A sample of five students was picked from each of the schools. The total number of participants was forty form three students.

Procedure

After getting approval from the education authorities, the students were assigned presentation topics which they researched on. The students were given a modified foreign language anxiety scale (FLAS) questionnaire (Horwitz et al., 1986) which they filled. The students then made class presentations based on the topics assigned. The presentations were made in a class set up, with the researcher and the language teacher being part of the session. The researcher video recorded all the class presentations.

Instruments

Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLAS) which was developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) Comprises of 33 items which relate to various factors in Language learning. The items in this instrument seek information on English class performance anxiety, confidence while using English language, confidence while conversing with native English speakers and fear of ambiguity in English (Thomson & Lee, 2013). For the

purposes of this study, the researcher worked with 20 items from the FLAS which sought information related to English class performance anxiety. The anxiety scores were converted to a percentage with the very anxious students scoring above 75% and those who were very confident having a score of 25% and below. A voice recorder was also used to collect data on the errors that appeared in the students' presentations. The class presentations were recorded on video and later transcribed for analysis.

Results and Discussions

Language Anxiety Levels during Class Presentations

Anxiety level	no. Of students	percentage
Very Anxious	2	6%
Anxious	4	10%
Confident	24	59%
Very confident	10	25%

Categories of Errors in the Students' Presentations

Type of error	Number of errors	percentage
Noun phrase errors	60	37
Verb phrase errors	38	24
Adverbial errors	9	6
Adjectival errors	8	5
Prepositional errors	35	22
Coordination errors	10	6

The Correlation Coefficient

The pearson product moment correlation coefficient is used to quantify the association or relationship between two variables. The forty students who took part in the study were grouped into two clusters of twenty students and the pearson product correlative coefficient processed for each of the groups as indicated below

Cluster A

Language Anxiety Level(x)	No.of errors(y)	$(x - \bar{x})$	$(y - \bar{y})$	$(x - \bar{x})^2$	$(y - \bar{y})^2$	$(x - \bar{x})(y - \bar{y})$
47	4	16.7	-1.7	278.89	2.89	-28.39
32	4	1.7	-1.7	2.89	2.89	-2.89
28	5	-2.3	-0.7	5.29	0.49	1.61
26	5	-4.3	-0.7	18.49	0.49	3.01
24	9	-6.3	3.3	39.69	10.89	-20.79
24	7	-6.3	1.3	39.69	1.69	-8.19
20	4	-10.3	-1.7	106.09	2.89	17.51
28	7	-2.3	1.3	5.29	1.69	-2.99
30	6	-0.3	0.3	0.09	0.09	-0.09
28	7	-2.3	1.3	5.29	1.69	-2.99
24	5	-6.3	-0.7	39.69	0.49	4.41
33	8	-2.7	2.3	7.29	5.29	-6.21
23	7	-7.3	1.3	53.29	1.69	-9.49
24	4	-6.3	-1.7	39.69	2.89	10.71
24	4	-6.3	-1.7	39.69	2.89	10.71
26	7	-4.3	1.3	18.49	1.69	-5.59
39	5	8.7	-0.7	75.69	0.49	-6.09
26	6	-4.3	0.3	18.49	0.09	-7.38
57	4	20.7	-1.7	428.49	2.89	-35.19
49	6	18.7	0.3	349.69	0.09	5.61

$$r = -0.314$$

The correlation coefficient (r) takes values between +1 and -1. When the value for r is given as +1, it indicates a perfect positive correlation. When the value is between 0 and +1, the correlation is positive but not perfect while a zero (0) correlation coefficient shows that there is no association between the two variables. If the figure for r is given as -1, it denotes a negative correlation. If the correlation coefficient is between -1 and 0, there is a negative, though not perfect association between the x and y variables (Diamond & Jefferies, 2001). This was the case in the data above. A correlation coefficient of -0.314 indicates a weak negative association between the language anxiety levels and frequency of errors in the students' presentations. The students who had high levels of anxiety avoided detail in their presentations and therefore relatively fewer errors were identified in their work as compared to the students with minimum anxiety. They made detailed presentations.

Cluster B

Language anxiety level (x)	Number of errors (y)	$(x - \bar{x})$	$(y - \bar{y})$	$(x - \bar{x})^2$	$(y - \bar{y})^2$	$(x - \bar{x})(y - \bar{y})$
42	10	3.4	2.25	11.56	5.0625	7.65
24	6	-14.6	-1.75	213.16	3.0625	25.55
56	7	17.4	-0.75	302.76	0.5625	-13.05
49	4	10.4	-3.75	108.1	14.0625	-39
48	9	9.4	1.25	88.36	1.5625	11.75
38	7	-0.6	-0.75	0.36	0.5625	0.45
28	5	-10.6	-2.75	112.36	7.5625	29.15
34	7	-4.6	-0.75	21.16	0.5625	3.45
59	3	20.4	-4.75	416.16	22.5625	-96.9
52	6	13.4	-1.75	179.56	3.0625	-23.45
46	7	7.4	-0.75	54.76	0.5625	-5.55
46	14	7.4	6.25	54.76	39.0625	46.25
49	6	10.4	-1.75	108.16	3.0625	-18.2
34	6	-4.6	-1.75	21.16	3.0625	8.05
40	4	1.4	-3.75	1.96	14.0625	-5.25
24	12	-14.6	4.25	213.16	18.0625	-62.05
22	10	-16.6	2.25	275.56	5.0625	-37.35
25	13	-13.6	5.25	184.96	27.5625	-71.4
30	9	-8.6	1.25	73.96	1.5625	-10.75
26	10	-12.6	2.25	158.76	5.0625	-28.35

$$r = -0.413$$

The correlation coefficient processed above (-0.413) indicates a weak negative association/relationship between the language anxiety levels and the number of errors. Students with minimal levels of anxiety made long presentations and more errors were identified in their work. Excessive anxiety led to some of the students presenting short items/ speeches where they had used few language structures. Consequently, relatively few errors were identified in the presentations by the students with high LA levels.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between language anxiety and frequency of errors during language learning. The negative correlation coefficient denotes that high levels of language anxiety did not necessarily translate to

more errors. However, every student even those who made their presentations confidently portrayed some degree of anxiety. This confirms that anxiety is inevitable in language learning, an assertion presented in Tran & Moni (2015). In their study on management of language anxiety, they posit that it is better to accept language learning anxiety and make it serve learning and teaching purposes. The students portraying high levels of LA were not sure of their ability when speaking in the English class. They also worried about making mistakes when giving their input during the language lesson. Such students also experienced excessive panic when called upon to make a presentation in class and they were not eager to volunteer answers during the English lesson. To some extent, they felt that other students are better than them in relation to the language activities. These perceptions affected the students with high LA levels and the emotions acted as a negative filter during performance of language tasks. It is important to acknowledge that language anxiety has effects that may counter language learning. Fluency in the dominant language is negatively correlated with CA (Croucher, 2013).

Speech anxiety coupled with with fear of how this anxiety is physically manifested reduce students' level of positive affect about speech performance (Mladenka, Sawyer & Behnke, 1998). Anxiety is also known to cause performance deficits during language learning (Thompson & Lee, 2013). In the current study, it was clear that students who were very anxious were not enthusiastic about the presentations. They seemed unsure of their language ability when their turn came to make the presentations. These students viewed others as better and thus they did not want to be the first to make the presentations. Even when they were given enough time to prepare, they still showed signs of anxiety. This was seen in the relative unwillingness to take the first turn. It is therefore imperative for both language learners and teachers to ensure that the negative effects of this factor are minimized. For such efforts to be successful, it is also important to understand the factors that facilitate anxiety during language learning. These may include preparedness for a given task, worry about low scores, perception by peers and teachers' expectations. It is also crucial to mention that the responsibility of managing LA goes beyond the classroom set up. The stakeholders in the education sector also have a part to play. Tran & Moni (2015) highlight the role of the learning institution and also the guardians/ family in ensuring that LA does not derail the language learning process. This study also sought to identify the types of errors in the students' work. Noun phrase errors were the most frequent while adjectival errors were the least. NP errors were 37% of the errors identified. 24% were verb phrase errors, 22% were prepositional phrase errors, 6% were adverbial errors, 5% were adjectival errors, and 6% were coordination errors.

The NP errors identified involved use of incorrect suffixes, omission of articles, omission of nouns in noun phrases, inappropriate inflection for number, wrong use of pronouns and gender incongruence in the noun phrases. As for the verb phrase errors, they resulted from wrong use of auxiliary verbs, use of wrong tenses, inappropriate choice of lexical items and lack of subject verb agreement. The other category of errors appeared in the formation of, and redundancy in the adverb phrase. Similarly, adjectival

errors were few and they appeared in the comparison of the adjectives and also wrong choice of lexical items. Other errors were noted in omission and wrong use of prepositions. The last category of errors, though not prevalent were identified in the coordination of phrases and clauses. Those students who scored highly in the *FLAS* did not necessarily register more errors. Some of the students with minimal anxiety made very elaborate presentations but in some cases, such presentations had more errors as compared to others by students who had scored higher in the Language anxiety scale. The presentations by those students whose LA scores were above 75% anxiety (3.5 and above in the *FLAS* scale) lacked in detail. Such presenters showed reluctance to participate in the language tasks and when they obliged, they just gave the basic details in an effort to steer away from any error. This explains why in some cases, few errors were identified in their work. On the other hand the students with low anxiety did not shy away from exploring different language structures sometimes resulting to erroneous forms.

Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm the inevitability of anxiety during language learning. All the participants in this study indicated some level of language anxiety. As Tran & Moni (2015) indicate, it is better to accept language learning anxiety and make it serve teaching and learning purposes. This study also revealed a weak negative correlation (-.31 and -.41) between the anxiety levels and the frequency of errors. Various categories of errors were identified. These were noun phrase errors (37%), verb phrase errors (24%), adverbial errors (6%), adjectival errors (5%) prepositional errors (22%) and coordination errors (6%). However, the students with high anxiety did not record the highest number of errors. This study revealed that these students' level of willingness to present was low and the language content in their presentations was brief thus the fewer errors as compared to students with low levels of anxiety. LA should therefore be viewed from two dimensions. It is an integral aspect of the language learning process and it is not realistic to talk of its elimination. The most practical thing to do is to manage the anxiety to minimal levels. To address the negative impact of excessive language anxiety on the language learning process, it is important for students, teachers and other key parties to play their part in the management of language anxiety with a view to making classroom communication and language learning more effective.

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