Language Anxiety and Learner Achievement among University Undergraduates in Sri Lanka: A Case Study of University of Sri Jayewardenepura

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Abstract : Language Anxiety (LA) – a distinct psychological construct of self-perceptions and behaviors related to classroom language learning – is perceived as a significant variable highly correlated with Second Language Acquisition (SLA). However, the existing scholarship has inadequately explored the nuances of LA in relation to South Asia, especially in terms of Sri Lankan higher education contexts. Thus, the current study, situated within the broad areas of Psychology of SLA and Applied Linguistics, investigates the impact of competency-based LA and identity-based LA on learner achievement among undergraduates of Sri Lanka. Employing a case study approach to explore the impact of LA, 750 undergraduates of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka, thus covering 25% of the student population from all seven faculties of the university, were selected as participants using stratified proportionate sampling in terms of ethnicity, gender, and disciplines. The qualitative and quantitative research inquiry utilized for data collection include a questionnaire consisting a set of structured and unstructured questions, and semi-structured interviews as research instruments. Data analysis includes both descriptive and statistical measures. As per the quantitative measures of data analysis, the study employed Pearson Correlation Coefficient test, Chi-Square test, and Multiple Correspondence Analysis; it used LA as the dependent variable, and two types of independent variables were used: direct and indirect variables. Direct variables encompass the four main language skills-reading, writing, speaking and listening- and test anxiety. These variables were further explored through classroom activities on grammar, vocabulary and individual and group presentations. Indirect variables are identity, gender and cultural stereotypes, discipline, social background, income level, ethnicity, religion and parents' education level. Learner achievement was measured through final scores the participants have obtained for Compulsory English- a common first-year course unit mandatory for all undergraduates. LA was measured using the FLCAS. In order to increase the validity and reliability of the study, data collected were triangulated through descriptive content analysis. Clearly evident through both the statistical analysis and the qualitative analysis of the results is the significant linear negative correlation between LA and learner achievement, and the significant negative correlation between LA and culturally-operated gender stereotypes which create identity disparities in learners. The study also found that both competency-based LA and identity-based LA are experienced primarily and inescapably due to the apprehensions regarding speaking in English. Most participants who reported high levels of LA were from an urban socio-economic background of lower income families. Findings exemplify the linguistic inequality prevalent in the socio-cultural milieu in Sri Lankan society. This inequality makes learning English a dire need, yet, very much an anxiety provoking process because of many sociolinguistic, cultural and ideological factors related to English as a Second Language (ESL) in Sri Lanka. The findings bring out the intricate interrelatedness of both the dependent variable (LA) and the independent variables stated above, emphasizing that the significant linear negative correlation between LA and learner achievement is connected to the affective, cognitive and sociolinguistic domains of SLA. Thus, the study highlights the promise in linguistic practices such as code-switching, crossing and accommodating hybrid identities as strategies in minimizing LA and maximizing the experience of ESL.

Keywords : language anxiety, identity-based anxiety, competence-based anxiety, TESL, Sri Lanka