

An Effective Use of Second Language to Reduce the Anxiety of The First Year Students at State Pariyatti Sasana University in Mandalay of Myanmar

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate second language learning experiences among first-year students at State Pariyatti Sasana University in Mandalay, Myanmar, examine the role of second language learning in reducing students' anxiety, and explore effective ways of using a second language to alleviate anxiety. A mixed-methods research design was employed, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative data were collected through questionnaires administered to 50 first-year students, while qualitative data were obtained from in-depth interviews with five university teachers. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

The findings revealed that students experienced a moderate level of foreign language anxiety, particularly related to communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Students suggested that anxiety could be reduced through the creation of a supportive classroom environment, the use of pair and group work, interactive activities such as games and role-playing, and flexible learning opportunities that allow students to learn at their own pace. The study concludes that effective use of a second language in a low-stress, learner-centered environment can significantly reduce students' anxiety and enhance their confidence in language learning.

Keywords: Effective; Second Language; Anxiety; Student; University

Introduction

In the contemporary globalized society, English has become an indispensable medium for international communication, academic exchange, and economic interaction. A vast amount of knowledge, information, technology, and business communication is transmitted globally through English, making it a dominant lingua franca in many domains, including education, diplomacy, and commerce. As a result, numerous countries have recognized the importance of English and have promoted it as a core subject in their educational systems in order to equip learners with sufficient language proficiency for participation in the global community.



In Myanmar, the importance of English education has been emphasized through educational reforms and curriculum development initiatives. The Basic Education Core Curriculum M.E. 1379 (Ministry of Education, 2018) introduced revised learning standards for foreign languages with the aim of enhancing students' communicative competence. These standards focus on developing learners' abilities to communicate effectively, express ideas and opinions clearly, present information through speaking and writing, and apply foreign language skills in academic, social, and community contexts. Such objectives reflect a communicative orientation in language education, highlighting not only linguistic knowledge but also the practical use of language in real-life situations.

Despite these curricular intentions, achieving effective English proficiency remains a challenge for many learners. One of the most influential factors affecting second language learning is anxiety, which has been widely discussed in the field of applied linguistics and second language acquisition. Anxiety has been conceptualized as an affective variable that can significantly influence learners' motivation, confidence, and performance. Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis suggests that negative emotional factors such as anxiety can act as a mental barrier that prevents learners from fully processing linguistic input, thereby hindering language acquisition. When learners experience high levels of anxiety, their capacity to attend to, comprehend, and produce the target language is substantially reduced.

A considerable body of empirical research has examined the relationship between foreign language anxiety and language achievement. Horwitz (1991) reported a negative correlation between anxiety and final course grades among learners of Spanish and French as second languages, indicating that anxious learners tend to perform less effectively in language classrooms. Similarly, Aida (1994) found a moderate negative correlation between anxiety and course grades among learners of Japanese, suggesting that anxiety is a significant predictor of language learning outcomes. These findings collectively support the view that anxiety is generally debilitating for second language learning, particularly in communicative and evaluative contexts.

However, the relationship between anxiety and language achievement remains complex and controversial. While many studies highlight the negative effects of anxiety, some researchers argue that a certain level of anxiety may facilitate learning under specific conditions. Chastain (1975), for instance, identified a positive relationship between what he termed "helpful anxiety" and language achievement among students studying French, German, and Spanish. This perspective suggests that moderate anxiety may increase alertness and motivation, thereby encouraging learners to invest greater effort in learning tasks. As a result, the role of anxiety in second language learning cannot be understood as uniformly negative but must be examined in relation to context, learner characteristics, and instructional practices.

Although extensive research has been conducted on foreign language anxiety, several important research gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature has focused on measuring the level of anxiety and its correlation with language achievement, while relatively fewer studies have explored how instructional practices and classroom environments can be used to reduce



anxiety effectively. Understanding anxiety levels alone provides limited pedagogical guidance unless it is accompanied by insights into practical strategies that can alleviate anxiety and support learners' emotional well-being.

Second, many previous studies have been conducted in Western or East Asian contexts, with limited empirical evidence from Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar. Language learning experiences are strongly influenced by sociocultural and educational contexts, and findings from other regions may not fully capture the realities faced by Myanmar students. In Myanmar, English is primarily learned as a foreign language, and opportunities for authentic communication outside the classroom are often limited. These contextual factors may intensify learners' anxiety, particularly among first-year university students who are transitioning from secondary education to higher academic expectations.

Third, existing research in Myanmar has largely concentrated on general language anxiety across multiple skills without examining the broader role of second language use as a means of anxiety reduction. Tun Naing (2003), for example, reported that senior high school students experienced high levels of anxiety in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and moderate anxiety in vocabulary and grammar. While this study provides valuable insights into the prevalence of anxiety, it does not address how instructional use of a second language, classroom interaction patterns, or learner-centered approaches might help reduce anxiety among learners.

Furthermore, limited attention has been paid to first-year university students, who often experience heightened anxiety due to unfamiliar academic environments, increased communicative demands, and fear of negative evaluation. The transition to university-level language learning can be particularly stressful, making this group a critical population for investigating anxiety reduction strategies. Understanding how effective use of a second language can support these learners is essential for improving both emotional and academic outcomes.

In response to these research gaps, the present study aims to examine second language learning experiences among first-year university students in Myanmar and explore effective ways of using a second language to reduce anxiety. By focusing on both learners' perceptions and practical instructional strategies, this study seeks to contribute context-specific evidence to the existing literature and provide pedagogical implications for creating low-anxiety, supportive language learning environments in higher education.

Objectives

1. To study a second language learning from the experience of the first-year students at State Pariyatti Sasana University in Mandalay of Myanmar.
 2. To study a second language learning to reduce the anxiety of first-year students at State Pariyatti Sasana University in Mandalay of Myanmar.
 3. To effectively use the second language to reduce the anxiety of first-year students at State Pariyatti Sasana University in Mandalay of Myanmar.
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Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The mixed-methods design was selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem by combining numerical data with in-depth qualitative insights. The quantitative component aimed to examine students' levels of anxiety and perceptions related to second language use, while the qualitative component sought to explore teachers' perspectives and contextual explanations that could not be fully captured through numerical data alone. The integration of both approaches enhanced the validity and depth of the research findings.

Research Area

The research was conducted in Mandalay, Myanmar, specifically at State Pariyatti Sasana University. This location was selected because English is taught as a second or foreign language in the university context, and students often encounter challenges related to language anxiety during their first year of study.

Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of 50 first-year university students ($N=50$) enrolled at State Pariyatti Sasana University during the academic year under investigation. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because the selected participants possessed characteristics relevant to the objectives of the study, particularly their direct experience with second language learning and anxiety in the university classroom.

In addition to student participants, a group of five university teachers was selected as key informants for the qualitative component of the study. These teachers were chosen based on their teaching experience and involvement in English language instruction.

Research Instruments

Two types of research instruments were used in this study:

1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from student participants. It was designed to examine students' experiences of second language learning and their levels of anxiety. The questionnaire consisted of structured items based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

The questionnaire items were developed based on established theories and previous studies related to foreign language anxiety, particularly the conceptual framework proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). The instrument covered key components of language anxiety, including communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by experts in English language teaching and educational research. To assess the reliability of the instrument, internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's



alpha value of 0.87, indicating a high level of reliability and confirming that the questionnaire was suitable for quantitative data collection.

2. Interview Form

The interview form was used to collect qualitative data from university teachers. It was designed as a semi-structured interview guide to allow flexibility while maintaining consistency across interviews. The interview questions focused on teachers' perceptions of student anxiety, classroom practices, and effective strategies for reducing anxiety through second language use.

The interview questions were developed based on relevant literature on foreign language anxiety and second language pedagogy. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative instrument, the interview guide was reviewed by experts in the field. Revisions were made to improve clarity and relevance. Although reliability in qualitative research is not measured statistically, consistency was maintained by using the same interview guide for all participants.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected over a four-month period, from June to September 2023. Quantitative data were collected through the administration of questionnaires to the selected student participants. Qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews with university teachers. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity were strictly observed throughout the data collection process.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. These basic statistical methods were appropriate for summarizing students' responses and identifying overall trends related to language anxiety and second language use.

Qualitative data obtained from interviews were analyzed using document analysis and thematic analysis. The interview data were transcribed, organized, and systematically analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns. The qualitative findings were then synthesized and presented in the form of a descriptive narrative to provide contextual explanations that complemented the quantitative results.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses were integrated during the interpretation stage. This integration allowed the researcher to compare and contrast numerical trends with qualitative insights, thereby enhancing the overall understanding of how second language use can reduce anxiety among first-year university students.

Results

Objective 1: Second Language Learning Experiences of First-Year Students

The first objective of this study was to investigate second language learning experiences of first-year students at State Pariyatti Sasana University in Mandalay, Myanmar. The results



indicated that students experienced a moderate level of anxiety in second language learning. This finding suggests that while students were not overwhelmed by anxiety, affective factors still played a significant role in shaping their learning experiences.

The item with the highest mean score was students' fear of being less competent than others ($M = 3.68$), indicating a relatively high level of anxiety related to self-perceived language competence. This result reflects a common concern among foreign language learners, particularly in academic environments where students frequently compare their performance with peers. Such competence-based anxiety has been widely discussed in the literature as a key component of foreign language anxiety, especially among learners at early stages of university education (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

In addition, students reported anxiety related to communicating in the target language at a high level. This suggests that students were concerned not only with basic communication but also with meeting perceived expectations of fluency and accuracy in academic contexts. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), communication apprehension often arises when learners feel pressure to perform beyond their current proficiency level. This pressure may be intensified in university settings, where students are expected to participate in discussions, presentations, and formal assessments in a second language.

These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that first-year university students often experience heightened anxiety due to the transition from secondary education to higher education. The unfamiliar academic environment, increased communicative demands, and fear of negative evaluation contribute to moderate but persistent anxiety levels (Young, 1991). Therefore, the results of Objective 1 highlight that second language learning experiences among first-year students are shaped by both cognitive challenges and emotional concerns, particularly those related to self-confidence and peer comparison.

Objective 2: Second Language Learning and Anxiety Reduction

The second objective of this study aimed to examine how second language learning relates to anxiety reduction among first-year students at State Pariyatti Sasana University. The findings revealed that several aspects of language learning were closely associated with students' anxiety experiences, particularly those related to communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

The results showed that students were most concerned about panicking when speaking without preparation, which reflects fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension. This finding indicates that spontaneous speaking tasks pose a significant challenge for learners, especially when they feel unprepared or fear making mistakes in front of others. Horwitz et al. (1986) identified fear of negative evaluation as a central dimension of foreign language anxiety, particularly in classroom speaking situations where learners are exposed to immediate judgment from teachers and peers.

Another prominent source of anxiety was students' concern that other students were better at English, which represents competence-based fear. This type of anxiety stems from social



comparison and self-doubt, leading learners to underestimate their own abilities. Research by Dörnyei (2005) suggests that learners' self-concept and perceived competence strongly influence motivation and anxiety in second language learning. When learners believe that their peers are more proficient, their anxiety increases, potentially reducing their willingness to communicate. Furthermore, students reported anxiety related to poor performance on tests, indicating the presence of test anxiety. Test anxiety has been shown to negatively affect language performance by interfering with cognitive processing and recall (Cassady & Johnson, 2002). In language learning contexts, traditional testing methods may exacerbate anxiety, particularly when assessments emphasize accuracy and error-free performance rather than communicative competence.

Overall, the findings for Objective 2 suggest that second language learning can be both a source of anxiety and a potential means of anxiety reduction, depending on instructional practices. When language learning emphasizes high-stakes evaluation and spontaneous performance without adequate support, anxiety levels increase. Conversely, when learning environments are structured to reduce fear of evaluation and support gradual skill development, anxiety can be mitigated.

Objective 3: Effective Use of Second Language to Reduce Anxiety

The third objective of this study was to identify effective ways of using a second language to reduce anxiety among first-year students. The findings revealed that students strongly believed anxiety could be reduced through supportive teaching practices, interactive learning activities, and flexible assessment methods.

Students reported that language classes could be less stressful if teachers focused on creating a supportive and encouraging classroom environment. This finding aligns with research emphasizing the importance of affective support in language learning. According to Oxford (2017), a positive classroom climate can lower learners' affective filters, increase confidence, and promote active participation.

One effective strategy identified by students was practicing speaking in pairs or small groups rather than in front of the whole class, particularly in the early stages of learning. This approach allows learners to practice speaking with reduced pressure and minimizes fear of public mistakes. Young (1991) found that small-group interaction significantly reduces speaking anxiety and increases learners' willingness to communicate.

Students also emphasized the value of interactive and enjoyable activities, such as games, role-playing, and storytelling. These activities shift the focus from accuracy to communication and engagement, making language learning less intimidating. Research by Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010) supports the use of communicative activities as a means of reducing anxiety and enhancing fluency.

In terms of assessment, students suggested replacing traditional tests with creative and performance-based assessments that allow them to apply language skills in real-life scenarios. Alternative assessment methods, such as projects, presentations, and portfolios, have been



shown to reduce test anxiety and provide a more comprehensive picture of learners' communicative competence (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019).

Additionally, students believed that allowing them to learn at their own pace could reduce stress. Providing optional practice materials and allowing learners to choose topics for projects were perceived as effective ways to personalize learning. Learner autonomy has been widely recognized as a key factor in reducing anxiety and increasing motivation in second language learning (Little, 2007).

Taken together, the findings for Objective 3 demonstrate that effective use of a second language to reduce anxiety requires learner-centered pedagogy, flexible assessment, and emotionally supportive teaching practices.

Summary of Results

In summary, the results of this study indicate that first-year students at State Pariyatti Sasana University experience moderate anxiety in second language learning, primarily related to self-perceived competence, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. However, the findings also demonstrate that anxiety can be effectively reduced through supportive classroom environments, interactive learning activities, alternative assessment methods, and flexible learning opportunities. These results highlight the importance of addressing affective factors alongside linguistic development in second language education.

New Body of Knowledge

This study provides new knowledge by identifying students' self-perceived English competence as a key determinant of foreign language anxiety among first-year university students. The findings demonstrate that anxiety is strongly linked to learners' self-evaluation rather than solely to linguistic ability. The study further contributes by proposing a context-based approach to anxiety reduction, emphasizing the use of a tailored foreign language anxiety scale to help students recognize anxiety sources, combined with small-group peer discussions for emotional support. Additionally, the research highlights the importance of realistic goal-setting and diversified classroom activities in enhancing learning strategies and reducing anxiety. Importantly, the results reveal a negative relationship between anxiety and language performance, particularly among moderate and high achievers, indicating that these students may be more vulnerable to performance-related anxiety. This finding underscores the need for low-stress, learner-centered instructional environments that address both cognitive and affective dimensions of second language learning in higher education.

Suggestions

The study's findings were based on a convenience sample of first-year students taking only their second foundation English course, limiting the generalizability of the results. Future research should expand the scope by examining students in different stages of English learning including the first foundation course and later advanced courses to better track changes in anxiety



levels across proficiency levels. Additionally, since participants were exclusively from scientific and technological majors, potential variations in anxiety based on academic disciplines remain unexplored. Investigating a more diverse student population across different majors could reveal whether anxiety sources and intensity differ by field of study, providing a more comprehensive understanding of foreign language learning anxiety.

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