

Student Anxiety and Learning Difficulties in Academic English Courses

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Abstract

Anxiety and learning difficulties are an increasingly common feature in language learning courses in all educational levels. By the time students with these issues enter university, they may have had a variety of positive or negative experiences with foreign language learning, and may have developed a number of coping mechanisms to manage their conditions. The purpose of this paper is to examine learning difficulties and anxiety experienced by Finnish university students in their compulsory academic and field-specific English courses. In Finland, all university degrees include courses on academic English reading, writing, communication and presenting, and every year a number of students bring up their challenges with English, either before the course, during it, or in many cases only after having failed the course. With a case study of five university students, the paper introduces when and how students reveal their anxiety or learning difficulty with academic English, how those issues are considered during the course and how the students perceived their learning process during the course. Results demonstrate that Finnish university students experience a variety of anxiety and learning issues, and while some are proactive in bringing these forward to the lecturer, many reveal their problems only after a failed performance or grade. However, most students seem to appreciate the measures taken by the lecturer to address their issues and concerns during the course. This implies that language teachers, lecturers and instructors should actively support their students and be aware of potential sources of anxiety and learning difficulties.

Keywords: foreign language study, language learning difficulties, performance anxiety, English for academic purposes, higher education, study and teaching

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1 Introduction

Anxiety and learning difficulties are an increasingly common phenomenon in various educational levels, from kindergarten and primary school to higher education. These issues also play a significant role in language learning throughout an individual's lifetime because language learning itself can be a source of anxiety. However, the various facets of using a foreign language, such as speaking, listening, reading, writing, presenting and test-taking can also be separate sources for concern for many students.

The purpose of this study is to examine learning difficulties and anxiety experienced by Finnish university students in their compulsory academic and field-specific English courses. In Finland, all university degrees include courses on academic English reading, writing, communication and presenting, and every year a number of students bring up their challenges with English, either before the course, during it, or in many cases only after having failed the course.

This paper will introduce the foundations of learning difficulties in foreign language learning and common challenges with academic English as experienced by Finnish university students, including social anxiety, panic disorder, depression and performance anxiety. The study will include a case study of five Finnish students from the academic year 2016-2017 with expressed learning difficulties, how they approached their learning difficulties, and what measures were taken in the courses to facilitate their progress and development of essential study- and work-related English skills.

1.1 Academic English in Finnish Universities

Since the mid-1970s, all HE degrees in Finnish universities have included compulsory language and communication requirements, a unique tenet even internationally (Räsänen, 2008; Tuomi & Rontu, 2011). All university graduates in Finland must have attained skills in at least one foreign language that enable them to follow developments in their field and to work in an international environment (Opetusministeriö, 2004). These requirements aim at preparing students for their studies, careers and extended lifelong language learning throughout their lives.

A vast majority of Finnish students elect English as the university foreign language and therefore complete courses on academic and field-specific English for their degrees. These courses include academic and subject-specific reading, writing, oral and communicative proficiency, developed through tailored practice on academic text comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, listening comprehension, development of formal writing skills, oral fluency and presentation skills. Most Bachelor's degrees will include one or two courses focusing on academic reading skills and academic communication skills, however some degree programmes where English plays an extended role both in the studies and in working life, such as Business and Economics or Law, will have more courses and requirements for English even in the Bachelor's level. This is to support the students' transition to the Master's level in which much of the teaching and learning take place in English.

1.2 Anxiety as a Social Phobia

Anxiety is not a new phenomenon, not in society or in education but the explicit prevalence of anxiety appears to be on the increase. Anxiety is considered an emotional and behavioural disorder that is processed internally, and it is related to phobias, mood disorders and depression (Westwood, 2004). Anxiety is typically categorised as either social phobia, general anxiety disorder, panic disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder (Cullinan, 2007). The first three are considered most frequently diagnosed among young adults.

Anxiety can also be divided into trait anxiety or state anxiety. In the former, anxiety is considered a personality characteristic and in the latter, related to specific situations (Mifka Profozic, 2013). In addition to state and trait anxiety, the term situation-specific anxiety has been used in the study of anxiety. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), foreign language anxiety, language-skill-specific anxiety (e.g. listening anxiety, speaking anxiety, reading anxiety, and writing anxiety), test anxiety, and classroom anxiety belong to that category. With school-related anxiety, test-taking has been considered particularly poignant (Webber & Plotts, 2008; Zeidner, 2010).

While test-taking is a solitary task, exposure to which can be limited to certain times and situations in university studies, social phobia can have a profound effect on university students in their subject studies and in their language and communication courses. Social phobia is a clinically significant phobia that is characterised by anxiety caused by certain social or performance situations, often leading to avoidance behaviour (Downing, 2007). Social phobia may also be either generalised, i.e. pertaining to all social or performance situations, or restricted to specific types of performance, such as public speaking (Downing, 2007).

Further, students suffering from a generalised anxiety disorder can similarly be very anxious about social or performance situations in which they are exposed to a new situation, new people and possibly evaluation (McGrath, 2005). This stems particularly from the fear of being humiliated or embarrassed and thus seen negatively by others.

1.3 Anxiety in Language Learning

University students in their academic and field-specific language and communication courses may therefore be suffering from various types and levels of social or general anxiety but for many students the foreign language is the main cause for concern. Language anxiety is the overall feelings of worry, fear and negativity associated with a learned foreign language (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012), and it is therefore often considered to be situation-specific anxiety where anxiety is experienced during language learning or communication (Mifka Profozic, 2013). While foreign language anxiety has also been seen with students who have chosen to specialise in foreign language study (Ewald, 2007; Toth, 2010), it may be more prevalent with students in their academic and field-specific language courses.

Language learning anxiety can manifest as dread, sweating, forgetfulness, tension, avoidance or absenteeism (Ewald, 2007), and it can affect various levels of language

use, i.e. the input stage, the processing stage or the output stage (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey & Daley, 2000). However, the output stage, i.e. speaking activities, oral language use and oral presentations, are considered most affected by foreign language anxiety (Gregersen, 2005; Woodrow, 2006), especially since this type of anxiety does not frequently transpire in the student's mother tongue (Chang, 2012).

Therefore, some scholars also argue that language learning anxiety may not be a general personality trait but instead an indicator of basic language problems, rather than an indicator of situation-specific and situation-driven feelings of uneasiness (Mifka Profozic, 2013). After all, low self-efficacy beliefs and fear of failure have been known to result in anxiety, stress and the exacerbation of self-perceived issues (Westwood, 2004)

1.4 Social Anxiety in Performance Situations

In the context of academic English courses for non-native speakers at university level, similarly to general language learning anxiety, performing in front of the class has been the most stressful element for students (Woodrow, 2006). Anxiety or stress can also affect short-term memory (Lapointe, Blanchette, Duclos, Langlois, Provencher & Tremblay, 2012), which may result in the heavy reliance on notes or reading, which in academic presentations are discouraged.

Particularly with students who have had stressful or unpleasant presentation experiences in the past, speaking publicly or in front of their peers can be daunting, and the idea of presenting may have developed into an anxiety reaction referred to as classical conditioning. Classical or reflex conditioning refers to a situation where the emotional reaction becomes connected with a stimulus, so that previous experiences with language or performing, or indeed performing in a foreign language, are associated by the student with unpleasant stimuli and experiences (Toth, 2010; Westwood, 2004). Santrock (2001) claims that much of the anxiety with students is connected to classical conditioning.

Therefore, when discussing anxiety in academic and field-specific language use in higher education, the phenomenon can be seen to relate to both language learning anxiety and performance anxiety, and therefore within the EAP/ESP course context, the issue can be difficult to fix. Dörnyei (2005, p. 198) has aptly asked of anxiety: "Is it a motivational component? A personality trait? Or an emotion?"

2 Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study into anxiety and learning difficulties with non-native university students in their academic English courses are as follows:

1. How and when do Finnish university students express their anxiety or learning difficulty in an academic English course?
2. How is the student's anxiety or learning difficulty taken into consideration during the course?

3. What is the role of the university lecturer/teacher/instructor in easing students' anxiety?

3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected with five students who in the academic year 2016-2017 had demonstrated self-expressed anxiety before, during or after an academic English course. The students provided written consent that their information could be used anonymously in this study. The students represented three different degree programmes, Business and Economics, Social Work and Environmental Policy, and were all in the later stages of their Bachelor's degrees. One of the five participants was male, the other four females, and their ages ranged from 22 years to 31 years.

The students had been in contact about their anxiety or learning difficulty either before the academic English course, at the beginning of the course, or after a failed performance on the course. In their own words, the students were suffering from anxiety, a diagnosed severe learning difficulty, panic disorder, depression, or a combination of the above. The students naturally do not represent all students at the university who suffer from the mentioned conditions, but can be argued to represent a cross-section of students in a case-study setting.

4 Results

4.1 "Ben"

In case 1, the student with a pseudonym "Ben", was a 25-year-old male student of Business and Economics. He was in his third and final year of Bachelor's studies and attended a blended learning course for academic writing and presentations required for his degree. During the online elements of the course, the student demonstrated no problems with the online communication and tasks or the writing assignments completed independently and returned online. However, in the academic presentations delivered on campus in small groups of 4-5 students, the student read the majority of his presentation from his notes, an element that in the course will result in a failed presentation.

After being privately notified that the presentation would not be passable, the student and I arranged a new time for him to deliver the presentation again, with feedback provided on why the presentation failed and how he should prepare for the second attempt. During this feedback, the student seemed upset but I attempted to console him that he was not the first or the last person to be asked to retake the presentation. We also agreed that he could bring a friend for support for the second attempt presentation. Later the same day "Ben" sent an email, describing how he was sorry for reading the presentation and that he suffered from depression and a panic disorder. This played a role in his heavy use of notes during the presentation (cf. Lapointe et al., 2012) but he would attempt to utilise less notes in his second attempt.

For the second attempt the student arrived with his friend for support, he appeared quite apprehensive before and during his presentation but had significantly improved his delivery so that the presentation was passed successfully. After being notified the presentation was passed, the student expressed relief and appreciation over the

process of being able to give his presentation again. He was hopeful that future presentation in English would proceed better but he was also conscious of the challenges posed by his condition and that his mental health issues would continue to play a role in his studies.

4.2 “Nina”

Case 2 student, pseudonym “Nina”, was also a student of Business and Economics, aged 23 and in the third and final year of her Bachelor’s degree. She had missed the business presentation on her course in the previous academic year because of an undisclosed illness and sick leave but was now supplementing the course by delivering the required presentation. The presentation was assessed as failed because of the heavy use of notes and reading.

Similarly to “Ben”, “Nina” also contacted me by email after she had received feedback on her performance and was asked to deliver it again. In the email, the student explained she suffered from a panic disorder but had tried to deliver her presentation without her anxiety medication. She expressed feeling disappointed she had not been able to do so successfully but would try to speak more from memory in the second attempt.

In the second attempt, a week later, the student was clearly on her anxiety medication, and delivered a moderately improved presentation that was deemed passable under the circumstances. While the student spoke slightly more from memory, the delivery was not very lively because of the medication and the student was quite lethargic and unresponsive during the feedback session after the presentation. She did not make comments about the process or having to deliver her presentation again, but seemed pleased to receive the news of having passed the presentation.

4.3 “Tara”

In this case the student of Social Work, pseudonym “Tara”, was in contact by email before her required course on academic reading skills began. In the email, she explained she suffered from a panic disorder and wished to know what the course entailed and how much contact she would have to have with other students on the course. She was particularly concerned about speaking in English to the class or having to take part in pair or group discussions.

In my response, I explained the course learning outcomes, content and typical classroom tasks in detail and assured the student that if she so wished, she would be exempt from answer rounds or pair discussions. She would also not be obliged to speak with the entire class listening, and that I would regularly check on her progress during the course.

The student responded quickly to the email, thanked me for the information and seemed to react positively to the proposed measures and tailoring offered for the course. However, after this response, the student never signed up for the course, never showed up to the course or was in contact with me again.

4.4 "Laura"

In the fourth case, "Laura" was a 22-year-old student of Social Sciences who had registered normally for her course on academic reading skills. After the first meeting on the course, she stayed behind to talk and showed a diagnosis for a severe learning difficulty in foreign languages. Diagnoses such as these are not usual in Finland and are provided by registered learning and health care personnel, typically during the student's upper secondary education and preparation for the Matriculation Examination. In the national Matriculation Examination accommodations are made for students with official diagnoses for learning difficulties (Pirttimaa, Takala & Ladonlahti, 2015).

In our initial conversation, "Laura" seemed slightly apprehensive about the course and how she would manage, but was eager to take part because she recognised the importance of academic English for the progression of her studies. In this conversation, we discussed the course programme and various classroom tasks in detail and she was assured that she could skip any answer rounds if she wished. She had also made good friends from her fellow students and was assured she could work together with them on most classroom tasks. The course was already planned to include an active use of pair and group work.

During the course the student made good progress and from a group of 25 students it would have been difficult to pinpoint her as someone with a learning difficulty had I not known this in advance. "Laura" opted to forgo some answer session and classroom discussion tasks during the course but otherwise seemed to develop her skills well on the course. I had made the conscious decision to check on her progress every week and to check if any of the course tasks or assignments were particularly unsuitable to her. Because of her official diagnosis, she was also offered more time for the final exam on the course but she completed the exam without extra time and passed the exam in the first attempt. In the course feedback she was very appreciative of the tailored approach to the course and expressed a sense of achievement for developing her skills and passing the course.

4.5 "Mona"

The final case student, "Mona", was slightly older at 31 years of age and a student of Environmental Policy. She enrolled to an intensive blended learning course for academic communication skills, including a presentation, to which she was referred to by another English lecturer. The student had a history of failing this particular course on another campus but had recently attended a special support course for student struggling with their academic English communication. As she was required to complete the communication course to obtain her Bachelor's degree, she had been recommended to take the blended learning course in which most of the communication took place in an online environment.

The student participated actively in the online components of the course, including written discussion forums, listening practice and written assignments. The first issue was with a video task in which students were asked to record a 5-minute video on their preparation process for the upcoming presentation. "Mona" emailed me to ask if she would send the task in writing, to which I replied that all students should practice

their oral skills before the presentation. To this the student replied that she had no access to video or audio recording on her computer (although this was a requirement on the course) but offered to send a recording in the post. A counter-offer of a voicemail message was quickly rejected as the time limit made her feel anxious. At this point the student revealed she suffered from severe performance anxiety and was dreading the upcoming presentation.

The presentations on the course were organised to be delivered on campus but in small table groups of 4-5 students, to entice more comfortable and interactive presentation sessions. As the session began, the student was positioned to the back corner of the classroom away from the other students, in what could be described as an avoidance position (cf. Dowling, 2007; McGrath, 2005). During the presentation process, she seemed less interested in listening to her table's presentations and more focused on her own materials but she took part in the discussions following the presentations. Her own performance was last and she was visibly anxious but ultimately managed well. She also received encouraging feedback from the table audience following her presentation and seemed relieved when the process was over.

In the written course feedback submitted online, "Mona" was very grateful for passing the presentation and the course and appreciated the tailored methods used on the course. She had found the process useful but suspected her problem of 'freezing' while speaking or presenting would persist. However, her experience on the course was positive and she found the support from the lecturer important in the process.

5 Conclusions

As the five student cases introduced in this study demonstrate, university students can suffer from a variety of anxiety issues in connection with their academic and field-specific language study. However, despite the varying conditions, ages or degree programmes, all students shared a common denominator: the lecturer. This highlights the role of the teacher in alleviating the language or performance anxiety experienced by students.

Similarly to the language learning classroom in other educational levels, also at university lecturers should foster a positive learning environment and to acknowledge the various skills levels and potential learning difficulties of their students. To ease anxiety, lecturers can try to build a friendly and encouraging learning environment in which they emphasise the role and importance of progress and improvement over perfect performance and present themselves as pedagogically aware instructors, intent on helping students with their learning (Chang, 2012; Ewald, 2007).

Pedagogical awareness also includes awareness of the effectiveness of different study and learning methods. Individual classroom accommodations such as working frequently in pairs and small groups has been found to be particularly beneficial for those suffering from language anxiety (Downing, 2007; McNamara, 2006). The cooperative element of learning can thus ease students' concerns as they receive peer support in their daily tasks and overall development, instead of being scrutinised and evaluated constantly in front of their peers. The overall concept of empathy towards the students, both as individuals and as a group, will support not only those with anxiety or learning difficulties, but all students. McKee and Scandrett (2016) have

shown that when lecturers, teachers and instructors show interest in the lives of their students and in their experiences and concerns, this connection will create a positive language learning environment. After all, academic support from the teacher is considered the most significant factor in alleviating language learning anxiety (Huang, Eslami & Hu, 2010).

In the end, students with social, emotional and behavioural issues can experience difficulties with their communication skills (McNamara, 2006), especially in connection with foreign language learning or use. In addition, a combination of performance anxiety and language anxiety can be a potent mixture of unease, apprehension and fear. This is frequently evident for instance in academic English courses where non-native students must deliver a presentation in front of their peers. For most students the situation creates some apprehension but for some with anxiety or other learning issues, the situation can seem next to impossible.

Therefore, language lecturers, instructors and teachers must strive to instigate positive classroom environments, emphasise their pedagogical expertise to promote acceptance of all learners and to support the learning process of all learning as individually as possible (Dörnyei, 2005). In this manner, lecturers can protect all students' motivation, encourage self-evaluation and ultimately create motivational conditions for language learning.

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