

The Influence of Communication Anxiety on Students' academic ENGAGEMENT AND academic Achievement

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Abstract

A plethora of research studies have been conducted in Thailand and other cultures on communication anxiety but scant research attention has been given to a comparison of reading and writing communication anxiety in relation to classroom engagement and academic achievement in Thailand. This study aimed at comparing levels reading and writing communication anxiety in-the-classroom and outside-the-classroom, in relation to classroom engagement and academic achievement of students in 5 different Thai universities, using English programs.

One thousand and seven Bachelor's degree students enrolling in any international programs in the 5 universities in Thailand namely 1) Assumption University, 2) Thammasat University, 3) Chulalongkorn University, 4) Mahidol University, and 5) Bangkok University were chosen as the sample size, using the random sampling technique.

To measure communication anxiety, the first foreign language anxiety (FLA) model was proposed by E. Horwitz, M. Horwitz, Cope in 1986 was utilized. Writing anxiety was measured by the "Second Language Writing Anxiety Scale" (SLWAI) proposed by Cheng (2004).

Quantitative methods utilized descriptive as well as the inferential analyses. The Structural equation modeling was utilized to test the proposed model and all hypotheses. Out of the three hypotheses and sub-hypotheses that were proposed, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported by the data, since H1a, in-the class and H1b, out-of class communication anxiety had a negative correlation with academic engagement but H1c, was supported by the data. Hypothesis 2 not supported by the data since the relationship between H2a, in-the-class foreign language anxiety, H2b, out-of-class foreign language anxiety and H2c, writing anxiety and academic achievement was not significant. Hypothesis 3 was fully supported by the data and students' academic engagement was found to influence student achievement significantly.



Overall it can be concluded that the speaking anxiety of Thai students is relatively high in comparison to writing anxiety. This seminal research is imperative for Thailand since the formation of the Asean Economic Community (AEC) at the end of this year, will bring about not only economic changes but also educational changes. Knowing and catering to students educational needs is not only a matter of choice but of necessity.

Key Words: communication anxiety, academic engagement, academic achievement

INTRoduction

“Life is ten percent what you experience and ninety percent how you respond to it.”
(Dorothy M. Neddermeyer)

Studying English in Thai culture is considered an arduous task since only a small percentage of about 27.16 % can speak and write English adequately (Crystal, 2003, pg 109). Hence, Xenoglossophobia/Anglophobia which is the fear, anxiety, tension, worry, apprehension associated with learning a second language or a foreign language will be a perennial problem. Although, Thai culture emphasizes studying English from the primary school level and English has been made a mandatory subject under the 2002 Education Act Amendment (National Report, 2004) English has not yet been declared a second language and is perceived as an unofficial second language/ foreign language. Thailand has never been colonized; Thai will be the only official language of Thailand according to former Thai Education Minister, Chinaworn (Bangkok Post, October 20, 2010). An overemphasis on English is a priority owing to the results of the English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2012) conducted on October 2012 in which Denmark ranked number

one but Thailand ranked 53rd out of 54 countries with Libya being the lowest (EF EPI, 2012).

With the above scenario maintaining student’s engagement can be challenging for many educators. The widespread use of social media results the “dark room syndrome” whereby persons are engrossed with on line communication in their own private territory and lose touch with personal communication and creates a daunting task for teachers to make students pay attention to them. Communication anxiety could also be caused by external factors like culture, gender, cohort and the use of a foreign language besides the mother tongue etc which are more general and apply to large parts of the population. Disengagement according to Lamb et al (2004) can result in truanting, inappropriate behaviors in the classroom and low academic achievement.

McCroskey (1977) defined CA as **“an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (p. 78)**. Although McCroskey emphasized on spoken anxiety, Hassan (2001, p 4) stated that second language writing anxiety is “a general avoidance of writing and of situations perceived by the individuals to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by

the potential for evaluation of that writing”. Writing anxiety (Cheng, 2004) consists of three factors which includes, Somatic anxiety which refers to physical aspects of anxiety like being nervous and tense, Cognitive anxiety, which is related to thinking about performance, negative expectations and others’ perceptions and finally, avoidance behavior, which includes avoidance of writing.

The Concept of Academic Engagement

Engagement can be defined as the degree to which students are involved in the class and out of the class and pay full attention to what is going at presently. As early as 1984, Alexander Astin used the term involvement. This was followed by terms like student experience and then research-led teaching. Today, the word school engagement is one of the most popular words in higher education.

School engagement could be regarded as a multidimensional concept which includes behavioral, cognitive and emotional facets. Behavioral engagement is concerned with students getting involved in activities organized by the school like sports day and dramas, elocutions, clubs, adventure trips etc. Cognitive involvement is concerned with whether students are willing to put in extra effort in order to comprehend difficult tasks or skills and emphasizes the learning aspect and self-regulation. Finally Emotional engagement is concerned with feelings that are positive or negative towards the environment in the school like classes, school friends, teachers, principle etc. In other words the concept of school engagement is the opposite of being alienated and is concerned with thinking, feeling and behaving which can often overlap. Instead of studying these 3 facets

separately it is better for researchers to perceive them as a whole since a child experiences emotions, thinking and behavior simultaneously since they are interrelated and if studied as a single aspect would rule out the fact of multidimensionality (Guthrie & Anderson, 1999). Guthrie & Wigfield (2000) believed that engagement should be studied only for work where many components are present. In Thai culture, (Dhanasobhon, 2006; ONEC, 2003) the failure to study English can be explained by the differences in ability in large classes, lack of opportunities for exposure and use of English, poorly trained and unqualified teachers and poorly motivated students. Therefore the question that needs to be addressed is, **“Do students from different universities have differences in their levels of academic engagement and academic achievement?”** It is imperative for educators to know these differences because the establishment of the Asean Economic Community (AEC) at the end of this year will create a diverse and multinational community of students and influx of foreign nationals. Studying English cannot be dismissed by people in Thailand

literature review

Studies Conducted on Communication Anxiety in the Thai and Asian Cultural Contexts

Juthamas Thongsongsee (1998) studied linguistic and cultural difficulties faced by Thai student graduates in American universities and discovered that many factors like lack of a clear understanding of norms in a Western culture, lack of ability to adapt to different styles of learning



and others problem related to personal needs had a major impact in the achievement scores of graduate students. Patcharaporn Songsangkaew (2003) studied the language function difficulties encountered by Thai students in the actual situation in America. It was found that compared to neutral or informal language usage of formal language in the language function was high in difficulty. A further investigation showed that there are many students who have problems with cultural adjustment, different learning styles and linguistic styles. In spite, of these problems students attempt to access their English proficiency by taking the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). This has a significant impact on academic learning. Khamkhien, 2010 agreed that to master fluency in speaking English is very difficult for Thai learners. (Darasawang, 2007) agreed that although English is made compulsory for all levels during schooling, the method of teaching is too traditional with rote memorization and grammar translations which students do not find functional and practical.

A study conducted by Crowe in 1992 found that Asian students had problem with writing English. Transition, cohesion and unity were difficult to achieve while integrating sources from research. There was a tendency for Asian students to copy patterns and formulas directly, without a real understanding of them and hence they had difficulty conducting research. The system also emphasizes too much of rote learning and memorization which resulted in plagiarism. Although the scores in English test like TOEFL, are minimum, students in the international programs could still have problems and difficulties in communicating in English (Liu, 1993).

Studies Conducted on the Relationship between Communication Anxiety, Academic Engagement and Academic Achievement

Baker & MacIntyre (2003) agree on perceived competence and state, that when learners believe that they may not succeed in front of the classroom they may shy away from the situation or become disengaged. Therefore, anxious learners are more likely to miss out on opportunities and increase their proficiencies. Cubukcu, 2008 agreed with the fact that learners who have low self-efficacy, have more anxiety as compared to learners with high self-efficacy. Mills et al in 2007 stated students' who study a foreign language and experience anxiety have higher rates of apprehension and avoidance behaviors which interfere with their daily behaviors and life. Salem N. (2006) investigated the role of motivation, gender, and language learning strategies in English Foreign Language proficiency (EFL) and found that cognitive and metacognitive strategies were most often used and those metacognitive strategies were most often used to measure proficiency.

Shernoff & Hoogstra, (2001) also discovered that when students are engaged in the classroom, it can predict motivation, commitment and general performance in school. Since English is a second language for Thai students, maintaining attention in classroom is an arduous job for teachers. Thai students may get distracted since they are nervous about speaking and reading English. Owing to the fact that they may get rebuked the students' communication anxiety is high and the best way is avoidance or engagement in other tasks like using communication devices.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

Objectives

1) To determine the levels of foreign language communication anxiety of the students who learn in the program that uses English as the medium of communication.

2) To examine the influence of the communication anxiety and classroom engagement of the students who learn in the program that uses English as the medium of communication.

3) To examine the influence of the communication anxiety on the academic achievement of the students who learn in the program that uses English as the medium of communication.

4) To identify the influence of academic engagement on the academic achievement of students who learn in the program that uses English as the medium of communication

Hypotheses

Three hypotheses were formulated which are as follows:

H1a. Classroom foreign language anxiety is negatively related to student academic engagement.

H1b. Out-of-classroom foreign language anxiety is negatively related to student academic engagement.

H1c. Writing anxiety is negatively related to student engagement.

H2a. Classroom foreign language anxiety is negatively related to academic achievement

H2b. Out-of-classroom foreign language anxiety is negatively related to academic achievement

H2c. Writing anxiety is negatively related to

academic achievement.

H3. Student academic engagement is related to academic achievement.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

Population Sampling and Sampling

One thousand two hundred Bachelor's degree students enrolling in any international programs in the 5 universities in Thailand namely 1) Assumption University, 2) Thammasat University, 3) Chulalongkorn University, 4) Mahidol University, and 5) Bangkok University were chosen as the sample size using random sampling. One thousand and seven were finally used for data analysis eventually since some forms were left incomplete.

Questionnaires

To measure communication anxiety, the first foreign language anxiety (FLA) model was proposed by E. Horwitz, M. Horwitz, and Cope in 1986. The scale contains 33 measurement items measuring listening and speaking anxiety when using a foreign language in the classroom as well as outside the classroom. The five-point rating scale was designed. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the pre-test was 0.859.

The second measurement scale was the "Second Language Writing Anxiety Scale" (SL-WAI) proposed by Cheng (2004). The scale was composed of 22 measurement items to measure written communication anxiety. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the pre-test was 0.829.

The "College Students Engagement Scale" (CSES) was the modified version of Harter, Schmidt, Killham, & Agrawal (2009) scale used to measure

student engagement Three dimensions of student engagement i.e. enthusiasm, persistence and involvement were measured. Eight items were designed to measure each dimension. Five points Likert scales varying from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) were assigned to each item. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the pre-test was 0.662.

Data Analysis

At the initial stage, the data was analyzed descriptively. Then, the reliability of the survey data

using Cronbach's analysis was conducted before proceeding to the hypotheses testing together with the confirmatory factor analysis to ensure the quality of the data. Satisfactory results were obtained since the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all constructs were exceeding the cutoff point of 0.7 where the good fit of the CFA was $\chi^2/df = 10.10$; CFI = 0.931; RMSEA=0.047). Finally the structural equation modeling (SEM) was utilized to examine the research model and test all Hypotheses. The SEM is appropriate for this study because it could be used to examine both direct and indirect

Table 1: Descriptive Characteristics of the Main Constructs

Constructs/ Dimensions	Mean (Standard Deviation)					
	All Data	AU	BU	CU	MU	TU
Foreign Language Anxiety (Speaking & Listening)						
Classroom FLA	3.17 (0.53)	3.07 (0.56)	3.21 (0.54)	3.13 (0.43)	3.12 (0.47)	3.37 (0.51)
Out-of- class FLA	2.74 (0.61)	2.76 (0.63)	2.74 (0.57)	3.01 (0.57)	2.66 (0.50)	2.52 (0.64)
Writing Anxiety						
Cognitive Anxiety	3.07 (0.47)	2.99 (0.47)	2.96 (0.44)	3.14 (0.38)	3.09 (0.50)	3.21 (0.48)
Somatic Anxiety	3.09 (0.70)	2.92 (0.76)	3.15 (0.57)	3.11 (0.60)	3.05 (0.76)	3.34 (0.66)
Avoidance Anxiety	2.93 (0.59)	2.79 (0.55)	2.87 (0.57)	3.01 (0.62)	2.91 (0.66)	3.15 (0.54)
Student Engagement						
Enthusiastic	3.30 (0.44)	3.33 (0.50)	3.28 (0.48)	3.28 (0.41)	3.31 (0.37)	3.30 (0.35)
Persistent	3.34 (0.49)	3.36 (0.55)	3.23 (0.53)	3.32 (0.46)	3.39 (0.41)	3.39 (0.40)
Involvement	3.34 (0.49)	3.36 (0.55)	3.23 (0.53)	3.32 (0.46)	3.39 (0.41)	3.39 (0.40)

Note: AU stands for Assumption University; BU stands for Bangkok University; CU stands for Chulalongkorn University; MU stands for Mahidol University; TU stands for Thammasat University

relationships among several latent constructs as proposed in the research.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

H1a. Classroom foreign language anxiety is negatively related to student academic engagement.

H1b. Out-of-classroom foreign language anxiety is negatively related to student academic engagement.

H1c. Writing anxiety is negatively related to student engagement.

For hypothesis 1, a negative relationship

between a) in-the-class foreign language anxiety; b) out-of-class foreign language anxiety; and c) writing anxiety and student academic engagement was proposed. The results indicated that H1a and H1b were supported by the data while H1c is not supported by the data. This result indicated the significant relationship between foreign language anxiety and the student academic engagement both in the class and out of the class with a β of -0.109 and -0.094 respectively, at the 0.001 level of significance ($p < 0.001$), while the writing anxiety had no relationship with the student academic engagement. Thai students who possessed higher levels of foreign language anxiety tend to be less

Table 2: SEM Relationship Estimated

Hypotheses and Paths in the Model		Estimated Relationship Coefficients (β)	t-value	p-value
H1 a	In-the-class FLA → Engagement	-0.109 (-0.219)	-3.207	***
H1 b	Out-of-Class FLA → Engagement	-0.094 (-0.224)	-6.172	***
H1 c	Writing Anxiety → Engagement	-0.086 (-0.122)	-1.726	0.084
H2 a	In-the-class FLA → Achievement	-0.093 (-0.100)	-1.837	0.066
H2 b	Out-of-Class FLA → Achievement	-0.041 (-0.052)	-1.622	0.105
H2 c	Writing Anxiety → Achievement	0.026 (0.020)	0.337	0.736
H3	Engagement → Achievement	0.293 (0.155)	3.777	***

Notes: $\chi^2=88.788$, DF = 18, $P < 0.001$; $\chi^2/DF = 2.933$; GFI = 0.981; IFI = 0.975; TLI = 0.949; CFI = 0.975; RMSEA=0.063

Figures shown in each cell indicate the unstandardized coefficients where that shown in the brackets are standardized coefficients

*** t-values are significant at $p < 0.001$.

Squared Multiple Correlations (SMC) of the Student Academic Achievement =0.050^c



engaged in and outside the classroom. This study was conducted in Thai culture, where opportunities to use English hardly arise daily and sudden exposure to English to cause discomfort resulting in anxiety. Several studies support this outcome.

Baker & MacIntyre, (2000) that anxiety may not only affects poor language learners but also advanced learners since they have to maintain their own expectations as they perceive themselves as competent.

A study conducted by Bunrueng (2008) on the factors that affect anxiety and the levels of anxiety experienced by students at Loei Rajabhat University in the communication course., investigated 7 facets like 1) English for Communication subject; (2) speaking anxiety; (3) listening anxiety; (4) reading anxiety; (5) writing anxiety; (6) teaching-learning activity anxiety, and (7) teaching media and evaluation anxiety and found that speaking anxiety was the highest whether it is in or outside the class. In the class students were anxious about their preparation levels, did not have courage to answer questions, felt worried when asked to participate by the teacher, worried about their ability to use correct grammar, and were shy when they made errors. They were even shy to communicate with their friends.

In a Thai culture, it could be that Behavioral (getting involved) Cognitive (putting extra effort) and Emotional engagement (feelings towards the environment) to speak read and speak a foreign language could be low because of anxiety. It is noticed that most English classes are taught by native speakers of English and this could inhibit Thai students to get behaviorally involved. Tananuraksakul (2011) findings of undergraduate students' show that Thai by nature were shy to talk to Thai

as well as foreign teachers and that their levels of confidence and anxiety were moderate.

According to, Udomkit (2003), students do not get an opportunity to participate and therefore lack confidence. Furthermore, affective factors like classroom activities, self-esteem and interpersonal evaluation are factors that could affect the environment and emotional engagement.

In Thailand high levels of cooperation and emphasis on good relationships rather than competition, is stressed (Hofstede, 2001) which could affect cognitive academic engagement both inside and outside to speak and learn a foreign language since it is not a priority to speak English to survive. Fieg (1976), felt that Thais most of the time feel that work should be fun (Sanuk) and even the word for work, Ngan can be translated as fun. When a superior delegates orders Thais, will comply quickly but soon get relaxed and happy. In fact they tend to smile and hate persons who complain, accepting all situations as, never mind (Mai Pen Rai) go with the flow. These factors could affect cognitive involvement since no extra effort is necessary and just obtaining a good enough grade is satisfying. Thai classrooms lack involvement and can be static which results in a decrease in academic competitiveness. (Fry, 2002; Wiratchai, 2002; Atagi, 2002)

H2a. Classroom foreign language anxiety is negatively related to academic achievement

H2b. Out-of-classroom foreign language anxiety is negatively related to academic achievement

H2c. Writing anxiety is negatively related to academic achievement

For hypothesis 2, a relationship between a) in-the-class foreign language anxiety; b) out-of-class foreign language anxiety; and 3) writing anxiety and academic achievement was proposed. All H2a, H2b,

H2c were not supported by the data. The relationships between all three types of communication anxiety had no influence on the GPA, i.e. students' academic achievement/ academic performance.

H3. Student academic engagement is related to academic achievement.

Hypothesis 3, was supported by the data since the β of 0.293 indicates a positive and significant relationship at the 0.001 level ($p < 0.001$). As such, the significant relationship between student academic engagement and academic achievement was shown. In Thai culture students who perceive grades as important will get engaged and hence outcomes will be higher. Studies also support these findings.

Students' engagement can often predict academic achievement in many situations (Walker, Green, & Mansell, 2006) and student engagement can also explain the discrepancies in student achievement levels in cross-sectional studies (Williams, 2000) at the classroom and school levels (Covington, 2002) Many studies indicate that behavioral and cognitive engagement has a strong positive correlation with academic achievement. (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Marks, 2000; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990; Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Boekarts et al., 2000; Zimmerman, 1990 found that when students use meta-cognitive strategies like self-management, are able to regulate their attention and make a connection between past and present knowledge they perform better.

Lerdpornkulrat Koul & Sujivorakul (2012) study indicates that students who have high self-beliefs have a more positive attitude towards education and also provide better results. A recent study conducted in Thailand by Wonglorsaichon, Wongwanich & Wiratchai (2014) on "The Influence

of Students School Engagement on Learning Achievement: A Structural Equation Modeling Analysis" indicated that there was a direct and significant effect of school engagement on achievement.

The main grading system of most universities in Thailand is based on credit points system (WHED, 2008) and it is grades that give students recognition. Often students claimed that they can achieve a good grade but may be failures in speaking English (Phothongsunan & Suwanarak 2008). Hence it could also be an external reward rather than motivation alone for academic achievement. Therefore, it is a priority for teachers and schools these days to pay attention to students overall needs and put knowledge into practice if a positive outcome is expected.

SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Communication anxiety can eventually lead to students experiencing discomfort and lack of engagement because the learning process is perceived as boring in the classrooms. The findings of this research are seminal and it was found that in Thai culture the speaking anxiety seems be more prominent than writing anxiety.

Plenty of precautions can be undertaken to make learning a less stressful by promoting an "atmosphere of caring" about students needs. This study could be replicated on the basis of the major findings and a broad avenue for future research can recommended

Just examining Thai university students' communication reading and writing anxiety using quantitative methods may be insufficient to



summarize a conclusion about communication anxiety. Researchers can examine students at a younger age like primary and secondary school using more qualitative methods like observations and interviews which will not only indicate communication anxiety but could also examine the source in more depth. Using 5 universities in Thai-

land does not provide an insight into the problems of communication anxiety of students in other international programs throughout the country. However, there is a great deal of work yet to be done to identify effective scales to measure both reading and writing communication anxiety that are suitable for a culture and across all contexts.

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