

How Fear Affects EFL Acquisition: The Case of “Terminale” Students in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing interest in investigating and exploring potential causes and the manifestation of language anxiety amongst EFL learners, the potential sources of this complicated phenomenon have not been widely researched and identified in the Cameroonian context. Horwitz and Young (1991, P.14) state, “we have been truly surprised at the number of students who express anxiety and distress in their language class”. This paper sets out to investigate the potential causes of fear, its manifestation and the possible recommendation to salvage this problem that significantly affects EFL acquisition in final year secondary students of the French subsystem (Terminale) of education in Cameroon. The theoretical framework for this study is the foreign language anxiety scale as established by Horwitz et al. (1986). Data collection involves participant observation and a questionnaire administered to 100 students. The findings revealed that Cameroonian EFL learners experience a very high level of fear, ranging from communication apprehension and fear of a negative evaluation. The conclusion points out that fear is due to the non-mastery of basic structures and therefore questions the appropriateness of the approach used in teaching EFL in Cameroon. The paper proposes possible strategies to effectively teach EFL that will reduce language anxiety and promote self-confidence in the learners. Fighting against erroneous beliefs such as “C’est Dieu qui donne l’anglais” (English is a gift from God) will also help students get more implicated in learning English.

1. Introduction

Language learning must be a rewarding experience, not hemmed with nerve-racking experiences for the learner. Research has persistently shown that language anxiety (LA) is a universal problem experienced by many students in the English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL or L2) classroom. Kosh an Terell cited in Horwitz (2001, p. 118) affirm that students find the most anxiety-provoking activities to be giving a presentation, oral skills and speaking in large groups. Fear can be viewed as a feeling of anxiety concerning the outcome of something. Fear is part of the various feelings of language anxiety in which the speaker experiences an unpleasant feeling of worry that you get when you think you are in danger. It leads to stress, panic and shyness. For educators, the challenges are manifested in promoting a stress-free learning environment that engenders interest in learning a second language. Teachers and students step into classrooms with loaded baggage of expectations, beliefs and prospects about a learning environment. As Horowitz et al. (1986) note, “Any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual’s self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear or even panic”. This fear inhibits EFL learners, causing them to end their secondary education with much apprehension concerning the language.

Despite the growing body of research on primary causes and the manifestation of fear in Foreign language acquisition and learning, the current study set out to seek the reasons for fear in final year secondary school students, the manifestation of fear, how this fear affects the learning process and also suggest some measures that can help the students overcome this traumatic experience. In this line, the study will provide answers to the following questions:

1. What factors hinder you from the acquisition of English?
2. What are the various types of fears you experience when speaking English?
3. To what extent does fear influence EFL learning?
4. What strategies can help ease the learning process and reduce fear?

Answers to these questions will give us insights into how to deal with the effects of fear in various language learning contexts.

1.1. Background

English and French were adopted as official languages of Cameroon in 1961 when East Cameroon had French as its official language and West Cameroon, which had English as an official language, reunited. After the reunification in 1972, both English and French had to be implemented into the academic curriculum of young Cameroonians (Chumbow, 1990). English that used to be the medium of instruction in Anglophone schools before reunification was introduced into Francophone schools and French was introduced in Anglophone schools (Kouega, 2004)

Francophone students follow the Francophone subsystem, which is implemented through the French language. English is compulsory and taught in the Francophone subsystem from nursery through high school. In fact, the English syllabus for Francophone secondary schools (MINEDUC, 2004) states that "the product of the system would have to use language to cope with the many varying situations and contexts in which they find themselves at all times. Language should be taught so that the learners are provided with study skills to cope with an ever-changing world. In other words, language is taught for effective communication". This means that at the end of their secondary school cycle, Francophone English learners are supposed to master some specific skills and competencies to help them communicate freely and effectively. But the reality is different. Most terminal students can hardly express themselves in English. Even with the Competence-Based Approach (CBA) implementation, teaching English through real-life situations has not changed. Students who have been learning English for almost 15 years, compulsory in all classes and obligatory in all official exams, still cannot express themselves. Despite the fact that several factors have been attributed to the non-acquisition of English by Francophone learners (Chiatoh, 2012), this study has decided to look into another problem that affects more than 80% of learners. From participant observation, I established some causes and manifestations of fear among my "Terminale" learners of English. This situation is a great handicap to students as they either lose confidence in themselves or even develop hatred for the language.

2. Literature review

2.1 Language anxiety

The word anxiety can be defined as a feeling of fear, or nervousness, confusion. Research has shown that anxiety is not uncommon in almost all disciplines of learning. Recently, Cassady (2010) introduced the term *academic anxiety* as "a unifying formulation for the collection of anxieties learners experience while in schools" (p. 1). While it seems that there is some commonality in terms of the nature and consequences of anxiety, the type of anxiety triggered in and suffered by learners from each specific discipline is, to a certain extent, unique to that specific discipline. Jones (2004) defines this phenomenon in language learning as a fear provoked when the learner is asked to speak in the second or foreign language in public, with the risk of social embarrassment. Oxford (1990), Jones (2004) and Turula (2004) conclude that anxiety has a negative effect on language learning; fears, nervousness, insecurity and lack of self-confidence are related to language anxiety.

Foreign language learning may be a challenging activity for many learners. Besides numerous variables that make the process of learning a foreign language challenges, foreign language learning (FLL) anxiety appears to be an important one among all (Baş, 2014). It is known that many students experience anxiety in one way or another during the language learning process. According to Gokhan Baş (2018), more than half of foreign language learners have FLL anxiety. In this sense, it is not surprising that a lot of learners complain about the anxiety they experience during this process. Many studies have explored the relationship between English language anxiety and the students' success. Many pieces of research have also proved that females are less apprehensive than males in learning English and the foremost reason for anxiety in speaking in front of other students (Awan et al., 2010).

Horwitz et al. (1986) concluded that FLA can be related to three variables: a) communication comprehension b) fear of negative evaluation and c) test anxiety. Students who suffer from communication comprehension usually do not feel easy communicating in the second or foreign language among other people, especially if they are needed to use their listening and speaking abilities. People who experience a high level of communication apprehension "withdraw from and seek to avoid communication when possible". Introverted and reserved people tend to be quieter and less willing to communicate. Students who suffer from fear of negative evaluation do not accept their language errors as a usual part of the learning but consider them a threat to their face. So they decide to remain silent and do not get involved in the class activities. Students who suffer from test anxiety consider foreign language learning, especially oral production, a testing situation rather than a chance to improve their linguistic and communication abilities.

2.2 ESL and EFL Acquisition

Early research on second language acquisition (SLA) emphasized cognitive variables like intelligence, language aptitude, learning styles, and so forth. After the research by Gardner and Lambert (1972), affective and emotional variables became important in the area of SLA (Chakrabati et al. 2012). Affective variables are “emotionally relevant characteristics of the individual that influence how he/she will respond to any situation” (Gardener and MacIntyre 1992). Most notably, after Krashen (1985) discussed the affective filter hypothesis in the theory of SLA, there had been a lot of research done in this area. The affective filter hypothesis discusses variables that can work out as a filter that obstruct language acquisition. The affective variables which Krashen discusses are motivation, confidence and anxiety. Krashen insists that individuals learn a second language only if they get comprehensible input and if their affective filters are low enough to let the input get in (Richards and Rodgers 2001). Affective factors are believed to play an important part in acquiring a second language. L2 learners might not use comprehensible input if a “mental block” is in place, inhibiting them from getting the language. The affective filter works like a barrier to language acquisition when the learner is not motivated, not having confidence or thinking about failure, and the filter is low when the learner is not anxious or is trying to get involved in the language (Du 2009).

2.3 English Language teaching approaches in Cameroon

In line with the vision of making Cameroon an emergent economy by 2035, the Ministry of Secondary Education (MINESEC) adopted reforms in August 2012 which consisted in aligning educational goals with the demands of a more skilled workforce. And that was the main aim of the Competence Based Language Teaching (CBLT) (Nkemele and Belibi, 2019). MINESEC (the ministry of secondary education) explained that this new pedagogical innovation was aimed at “making sure that the learners [could] apply what they learn in class in real-life situations outside the classroom” (Pedagogic Guide: English to Francophones 2014: 5). In fact, the previous paradigm, the Skills-Based Approach, was more focused on learners’ acquisition of knowledge instead of enabling them to use that knowledge in order to solve real-life problems. The new approach went through a trial period for two academic years (2012-2013 and 2013-2014) before its effective implementation began in Form I and Form II of the 2014-2015 academic year. Therefore, by the end of the 2020-2021 academic year, CBA would have been effective throughout the second cycle of secondary schools in Cameroon.

A major challenge to this approach has been the lack of preparation of the main stakeholders who were tasked to implement it. In fact, studies including Foaleng (2014), Nforbi and Siewoue (2015), and Belibi (2018) have concluded that ad hoc measures were not taken a priori to mitigate the effects of context-related hurdles such as large classrooms, insufficient funding, training and professional development of teachers, and the lack of teaching and learning materials. It was only obvious that classroom teachers would face difficulties in the course of implementing the new approach. With the shortcomings of this new approach, it is normal that students still complete the second cycle without a mastery of English. It is obvious that the need for a new approach To Language teaching is necessary for Cameroon.

3. Methodology

The case study design was adopted for this study. The various elements concerning the participants, the instruments, data collection, and data analysis framework are discussed in this section.

3.1 Subjects

The participants are final year secondary school students (Terminale) of the French subsystem of education in Cameroon, with English being taught to them as a Foreign Language. The participants were selected from a private secondary school in the town of Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon. They are from purely French-speaking homes and live in French-speaking environments. Most of the subjects use English only during the English class and have a proficiency level of 8/20. The 100 participants are aged between 16 – 20 years, with 65 girls and 35 boys. They study English twice a week, between 3 and 4 hours. This level was studied because they have undergone 15 years of English language learning and are expected to be the most proficient in the language.

3.2 Instruments

The instruments included participant observation and the administration of a questionnaire. Firstly, participant observation was conducted by me. It involved whole class sessions aimed at having firsthand information related to perception and fear manifestation by students. Being an English language teacher, I have taught this class over the years, and I can identify certain aspects of fear that hinder the learning of English.

A 15 item questionnaire was administered to 100 students in order to gather information concerning factors affecting SLA, their background, reasons for fear, manifestation, consequences and solutions to eradicate fear in EFL learners.

3.3 Data collection procedure

On Thursday 18th March 2021, a 15 item questionnaire was administered to 100 Terminale students. The first class was made up of 55 students, while the second comprised 45 students. The questionnaire was administered to the students during their EFL

class. The students took 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The 100 forms handed were returned with all the questions answered.

First, the participants were asked to complete sociodemographic questions pertaining to age, gender, family background and environment. They then answered the other questions based on identifying their fears, causes, effects, and possible strategies to help them. The questionnaires collected, the next phase was to sort the answers out and arrange them according to the various constructs related to communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. The questionnaire responses helped us reach conclusive statements regarding fear in the EFL class in Cameroon.

3.4 Data analysis procedure

The data collected from the research instruments was analysed based on the foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS) as a measure to identify LA. To measure FLA in classrooms, Horowitz et al. (1986) developed the FLCAS. The FLCAS LA has been conceptualized through three related performance anxieties; communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. The scale itself is composed of 33 items that were designed based on the academic performance evaluation of students. The 33 statements ask students to evaluate their level of EFL anxiety or unease, worry, nervousness and apprehension experienced in learning. Participants in the scale responded on a 5-point Likert type scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Possible scores on the FLCAS range from 33-165. The higher the score, the higher the level of anxiety.

The FLCAS has been recognized as a reliable tool to examine FLA in classrooms (Young, 1994). The present study adapted the questionnaire based on the 33 items on the scale in order to come out with the various reasons and effects of fear in FL class. Our questionnaire was not lengthy as lengthy scales can be cumbersome for respondents "can resort in an extended time to survey completion, a greater amount of missing data and lower response rates...They may also increase random systematic error associated with fatigue and boredom" (Maloney, Grawich and Barber, 2011:162). Boyle (1991) suggests that items selected should have a high loading on the factor measured by the scale. Therefore, we based our analysis on 15 items that we developed to explain the three constructs of communication apprehension, tests of negative evaluation, and fear of evaluation. The analysis was done and the results recorded on tables and in point forms for proper understanding.

4. Findings

4.1 Background information concerning language acquisition

Before delving into fear, it was necessary to ask questions that have to establish the student's background in learning the target language.

Concerning the love for the language, 100% expressed their will to speak English fluently but only 20% are confident. When asked how they speak English, 70% admitted they speak English during the English lesson and only 30% have different places where they speak English. 70% affirmed that the only person with whom they speak English is their English teacher. This figure is obvious because 100% of the students hail from French-speaking homes, their classmates are French-speaking and only 20% have English speaking neighbours from whom they hear little English words out of the classroom contexts. Concerning their English level, the teacher's evaluation situates their proficiency level below average.

From the above statistics, we note that there is a great will to speak English but the students can hardly be proficient due to environmental issues. The fact that they speak English only during the English class (twice a week, three to four hours), and their only interlocutor is the English teacher, is a hindering factor to speaking effectively.

4.2 Factors hindering proficiency in English

Among the factors hindering proficiency in English, we noted effective factors, non-mastery of grammatical structures, environmental factors, misconceptions (false beliefs about English), and the family's economic situation.

Students noted fear, lack of motivation, and lack of self-esteem concerning affective factors. 80% of our respondents admitted lack of self-esteem and fear contributed to their low English proficiency level. These can be categorized under communication apprehension.

The non-mastery of basic structures, lack of appropriate vocabulary and lack of coherent arguments to develop texts and speech. These factors relate to the fear of negative evaluation as a non-mastery of grammatical structures leads to errors. Due to these errors, they develop doubt and stay silent rather than accepting them as a normal learning process.

Economic factors mostly refer to the lack of books and learning material. 40% of our students did not have the school manual as such find it difficult to do exercises and work at home.

The last but not the least factor were misconceptions or false beliefs about English. We noted points such as *English is a gift from God* ("*cest Dieu qui donne l'anglais*"), *English is difficult*, *Anglophones always do things contrary to normal* ("*les Anglophones sont*

toujours a gauche”), *English gives head ache*, *English should be spoken with the American accent etc.* the most popular false belief recorded is the fact that English is a gift from God. With such ideas, the students come to the English class with psychological bias that will greatly hinder their learning.

4.3 The various types of fears

According to Horowitz et al (1986), the FLCAS categorises three types of fears which are communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. We discovered that our students reflect all these types of fears. From the questionnaire, 80% noted that fear affects their learning process. They cited different types of fears such as

Table 1: Types of fears

The fear of making mistakes
The fear of being ridicule in front of their teacher and classmates
The fear of being mocked
The fear of speaking in public
The fear of not being understood
The fear of being insulted by the teacher
The fear of mixing French words in their speech

From these fears, we discover that they have to do with all three categories of fears as outlined by FLCAS. As seen in the literature review section, the fear of communication apprehension prevents the learner from speaking in public, the fear of negative evaluation see their mistakes as a threat and as such fear of being mocked or ridiculed, and test anxiety learners consider foreign language learning, especially speaking, a testing situation rather than a chance to improve their linguistic and communication abilities. The fear mostly originates from immature FL vocabulary and structures.

Students explained that these various fears affect their attitude. They express fear by stammering, heads down, trembling, silence, sweating, blushing, rapid heart palpitations and tearful eyes.

4.4 To what extent does fear influence EFL learning

It is now clear that fear is very detrimental to the learning process. This affects proficiency level, attitude and even motivation. The students reported several effects of fear on their language acquisition process. Some of their views are recorded in table 2 below.

Table 2: Effects of fear on EFL acquisition

<i>-fear leads to a feeling of uneasiness and frustration as such it blocks understanding,</i>
<i>-fear makes me doubt if what I will say is correct,</i>
<i>- the look on people's faces terrorizes me,</i>
<i>-the fear of receiving insults from the teacher makes me hate the subject,</i>
<i>-fear makes me to believe I will never be able to speak English one day,</i>
<i>- fear prevents me from improving my speaking skills as I know practice makes perfect; but I am afraid to practice,</i>
<i>- fear makes me to get discouraged as such I do not even attend the English class,</i>
<i>- fear makes me to lost self-esteem and even motivation in the language leading me to be a silent observer in the class.</i>

Students recorded all these views. We can note that if nothing is done, the students end up developing a hatred for the subject. Some students have even lost hope of ever speaking English one day as such. They strive not to have zero in their evaluation. Concerted efforts of the students and the teacher should be put in place to reduce the level of language fear in the students just as Onweugbuzie et al. (1999) affirm, the higher the anxiety, the lower the performance. Strategies must be devised to reduce fear in the students.

4.5 Possible solutions to eradicate fear

The possible solutions recorded in this section were suggested by the students and the teachers. Students suggested a number of activities and strategies to motivate them, build their self-esteem and fight against fear. Table 3 below gives a summary of some of the strategies proposed by the students that could eventually help them eradicate their fears and boost their learning skills.

Table 3: strategies proposed by students to help them fight against fear

-Teach basic structures (tense, pronunciation, spelling, word building) not taking into consideration their level
-Teach English with audio and visual equipment like in language centers
-Use mostly words in contexts that reflect their real-life situations
-Make use of translation in the English class especially difficult words
-Encourage speaking by obliging students to read aloud. Every lesson student should be given portion of texts to read aloud. This will build their self-esteem and eradicate the fear of speaking in public
-Teachers should avoid frustrating students who make mistakes
-Teachers should motivate us with bonuses
-Give students punishment in case a specific task was not done
-Teachers should not allow students to sleep in class as this encourages laziness

From the above strategies, we see that the teacher has a lot of work to do, from teaching them the basic skills, motivating them and using appropriate didactic material.

4.6 Recommendations to the educative community

We have realized that fear emanates from the non-mastery of basic grammatical structures and poor vocabulary. If the student masters English, he will feel confident and also eradicate part of his Language anxiety. We can also recommend certain strategies apart from those proposed by students that can help the teacher in his mission.

- a) Teachers should avoid harsh manner of error correction as it frustrates the learner. He should rather let the students know that making errors is part of a normal learning process. He should use verbal motivation words like *good, try again, excellent, not very correct* etc.
- b) The teacher should always start by revising all the basic grammatical and vocabulary in every class from nursery to final year secondary school students. Emphasis should be on word building and pronunciation at the beginning of each class. The first week can be used for that.
- c) Teachers should emphasize speaking as this is the greatest area where language anxiety is perceived. Enough time should be allocated to this competence. Teachers should allocate ample time for students to read aloud or recite short poems or sing short songs. Since 80% of the students admitted they speak English only during the English class and with the English teacher, the teacher should make sure every student speaks during the class.
- d) To reduce fear, the teacher should be supportive, friendly and non-rigid. He should make jokes and tell short, exciting stories to keep his class lively. Students should feel confident with him. Once the teacher sees these attributes in his teacher, it will boost his confidence. He will speak without fear of mockery. He will ask questions about his difficulties hence eradicate some psychological blockages.
- e) The teacher should also act as a counsellor and adviser. He should bring the students to forget some beliefs about English like *"English is difficult", English is a gift from God"* etc. As Horowitz et al. (1986, p. 27) argue that certain beliefs about the language may contribute to feelings of anxiety in the classroom, the teacher should try as much as possible to fight this. He can bring in a student from another class who masters and speaks English fluently to use as an example to prove his point.
- f) The teacher should encourage students to communicate amongst themselves, create diverse activities which could enable students to interact. Create groups and give topics to students who will, in turn, do a presentation in class. These activities aim to build the spirit of solidarity among the students and eradicate the fear of speaking in public.
- g) The fear of negative evaluation should be alleviated by giving less stressful exercises and the teacher should avoid failing the students. This frustrates them and may lead to hatred of the language, pushing them to skip lessons or develop a bias towards ELL.
- h) Teachers should also encourage students to own a bilingual dictionary and read it as well. Encourage students to learn 10 English words a week to build up their vocabulary.
- i) The EFL teacher can create an immersion programme in a purely Anglophone environment in the form of an excursion. Since these students live in purely French-speaking environments, this immersion will be of great help to them.
- j) With the development of ICT, teachers can include audiovisual lessons in the language classrooms. We know that this is difficult in large classrooms but the teachers should consider this. Students will learn faster and the four competencies will be tested.
- k) The emphasis on language learning should be at the nursery and primary levels of education. Based on the critical period hypothesis as popularized by Lenneberg, (1967), language must be acquired before a certain age (to the end of 12 years) or

severely impaired. Based on this notion of the critical period, educators, policymakers, and parents worldwide can make important decisions about language courses and children.

- l) The syllabus should consider translation as one of the competencies to be acquired in EFL learning. Translation of words, sentences or paragraphs should be included. This will facilitate learning. The students will learn some difficult words in French and avoid using French in English. This will build their confidence in their speech and writing.

5. Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into EFL perceptions concerning fears. This study has provided a richer understanding of language anxiety in employing a case study approach. Teachers should be aware of the various fears their students are facing. "Terminale" students mostly suffer from communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. They have common strategies which are believed to help them develop proficiency in English. Just as young (1999) affirms, teachers must help students deal and conquer their feelings of anxiety (p.145) or alter their teaching practices to eradicate the cause of anxiety. Fighting against erroneous beliefs such as "*c'est Dieu qui donne l'anglais*" (English is a gift from God) will also help students get more implicated in learning English. It is outrageous that a student who has been studying English from nursery school (2years) through primary school (6years) and secondary school (7years), approximately 15 years of English language learning, still faces problems related to EL proficiency. Most of their fears are due to the non-mastery of basic English structures, which should not be a problem after 14 years of learning. Therefore, there is a question mark on the approach to English language teaching in Cameroon. We call on teachers and curriculum developers to develop new strategies to teach English more learner-based and motivate the students to speak. This study, through the analysis of fear factor in English language learning, has discovered that the approach in teaching English in Cameroon, the CBA, needs to be updated, taking into consideration some elements proposed by Nkwetisama (2012) and Nkemleke and Belibi (2019) and those proposed at the end of this study. Something should be done so that students can be proficient in English upon completion of the secondary cycle. The best level to emphasise language acquisition will be at the nursery and primary levels of education.

6. Limitations and suggestions for further research

This work was limited to the study of fear which is one aspect of language anxiety in the language classroom. It studied one hundred students from an urban setting and a private institution of learning. With proper funding, the research could have enormous scope. A similar study could be carried out in a public school with different levels of students. A comparative study could be carried out between the level of language anxiety in the EFL class and the ESL class. Also, a study could be carried out to explore the elements of the FLCAS in other contexts, such as undergraduates or adult learners in language centres.

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