

Hybrid Identities to Overcome Language Anxiety: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Language Anxiety (hereafter LA), a distinct psychological construct of self-perceptions and behaviours related to classroom language learning, is perceived as a significant variable in Second Language Acquisition. However, existing scholarship has inadequately explored the nuances of LA in relation to South Asia, mainly in terms of Sri Lankan higher education contexts. The objective of the present study is to analyse the accommodation of hybrid identities as a strategy used by learners of English as a Second Language (hereafter ESL) in Sri Lanka to overcome LA. Employing an exploratory approach, 750 undergraduates of a national state university in Sri Lanka, covering 25% of the student population from four faculties (Humanities, Social Sciences, Applied Sciences, Management Studies and Commerce and Medical Sciences) were selected as participants using stratified proportionate sampling considering ethnicity, gender and disciplines. The qualitative and quantitative methods included a questionnaire consisting of structured and unstructured questions, and semi-structured interviews. Data analysis included both descriptive and statistical measures. The study showed that social and cultural mobilization the university students experience, create within them, a cultural displacement, which in turn results in creating hybrid identities. Findings revealed that using hybrid identities in classroom activities help learners overcome LA. The study found a significant linear negative correlation between LA and learner achievement. Both competency-based LA and identity-based LA were experienced primarily due to the apprehensions regarding speaking in English. Findings exemplify the linguistic inequality prevalent in the socio-cultural milieu in Sri Lankan society. The study highlights the intricate interrelatedness of learner identity and LA emphasizing that the significant linear negative correlation between LA and learner achievement is connected to the affective, cognitive and sociolinguistic domains of SLA.

Keywords: Language anxiety, Hybrid identity, Sri Lanka

Introduction

The objective of the present study was to explore how hybrid identities of ESL learners could be used as a strategy to overcome LA they experience. The study was conducted in a national state university in Sri Lanka. Employing an exploratory study approach, 750 undergraduates, covering 25% of the student population from all four faculties (Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences, Applied Sciences, Management Studies and Commerce and Medical Sciences) were selected as participants using stratified proportionate sampling considering ethnicity, gender and disciplines of the learners. The qualitative and quantitative methods utilized for data collection included a questionnaire consisting of structured and unstructured questions, and semi-structured interviews. Data analysis included both descriptive and statistical measures.

The current research investigated one of the main affective factors related to language learning, which is 'Language Anxiety' (LA). Thus, the current study is situated within the broad subject area of Applied Linguistics, which is defined as 'the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue' (Brumfit 1997, p. 93 as cited in Davis and Elder 2004, p. 4). Applied Linguistics, as Dörnyei (2007) emphasizes, is undergoing a paradigm shift due to the interface it has with psychology. The theories of SLA (Second Language Acquisition) are revisited because of this association between the two subjects. Thus, this study is aptly situated in the area of the Psychology of Second Language Acquisition. The study carries out a scientific investigation to see whether hybrid identities could be used to overcome the impact of LA on learning English as a Second Language in Sri Lanka, particularly on the undergraduates. In exploring this the study also attempts to find out the impact of LA on learner achievement.

Background

The Sri Lankan context

Over the past decades, the world traversed by the L2 (Second Language) learner has changed dramatically due to the changes which have affected the linguistic landscape of the world. Thus, an L2 learner in the 21st century has to navigate the challenges of this changed linguistic landscape where the competency in one of the global languages is an inevitable need and the norm. Prospects for careers, education, especially higher education, social mobility are directly linked to competency in a Second Language. This research was conducted in Sri Lanka where English is used as a Second Language.

Sri Lanka, is a multilingual and a multi ethnic country. Presently, English is recognized as the link language by the constitution of Sri Lanka. The majority of Sri Lankans, that is, 74.9%, are Sinhalese and their First Language (L1) is Sinhala. Both Tamils and Muslims use Tamil as their L1. Out of the minority groups, 15.3% are Tamils, and 9.3% are Muslims and the remaining 0.5%² consists mainly of Burghers, who are Dutch descendants. Burghers speak a dialect of English as their L1.

Throughout the six decades since independence from the British Empire in 1948, the English language in Sri Lanka has gone through many diverse social, cultural, and ideological changes and phases, from total rejection to acceptance. The 13th amendment to the constitution in 1987 marks a landmark in language policy in Sri Lanka as it declared both Sinhala and Tamil as state languages and English as the link language. The 13th and 16th amendments to the constitution in 1987 and 1988 respectively, recognize the right to language as a fundamental right. Currently, both Sinhala and Tamil are Official and National languages and English is declared the link language. Irrespective of whichever status is bestowed upon English by the constitution of Sri Lanka, what is very apparently observable in society is that competency in English is a decisive factor for upward social mobility, social recognition and social acceptance.

2. Information from the Department of Statistics of Sri Lanka, Census report of 2012

Thus, English in Sri Lanka functions as the pathway for many opportunities and is both a yardstick for measuring intelligence and an indicator of social class. Hence, the identity of a person, acceptance, and recognition he/she receives in the society are all connected to and decided upon his/her competency in the English language. Therefore, gaining competency in English is viewed as an essential hallmark and a dire need for success and when it could not be achieved, it is considered a massive drawback and a great weakness. It is this socio-cultural dilemma that instigated this study. The immense pressure the students have, to be competent in English and the anxiety they experience because of the pressure, creates diverse problems both in and outside the classroom contexts. They are faced with the struggle of embracing new identities when acquiring the L2. Acquiring an L2 often creates a hybrid identity in learners, which in turn compels them to accept it. Therefore, to address this problem the study seeks to understand whether hybrid identity could be used positively, to the advantage of the learners by using it to fight LA in learning ESL.

Language anxiety and hybrid identity

Out of all the affective factors, Scovel (1978, p. 131) says that anxiety is 'one of the most important affective variables identified in learning tasks'. Anxiety related to language learning, 'language anxiety' was defined by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986, p. 128) as 'a distinct complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process'. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) suggest that foreign language anxiety should be viewed as a situation-specific anxiety, arising from the uniqueness of the process of learning a foreign language. It is not a simple case of general classroom anxiety being transferred to foreign language learning. They further define it as 'the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system' (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986,

p. 128). According to them, 'no other fields of study implicate self-concept and self-expression to the same degree as foreign language study'. This feature makes anxiety caused by foreign language learning different from other academic anxieties. It is possible that students with general anxiety are likely to experience Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). However, it is not uncommon to find those who are very good in other subjects, frustrated when learning a foreign/second language. Therefore, it is certain that language learning is an experience that makes learners anxious. In research, LA is defined as a feeling of tension, apprehension, fear, shyness, and worry experienced by second language learners. The term 'language anxiety', in this research, refers to anxiety that learners encounter in the ESL context.

Literature identifies four major kinds of anxieties: Trait Anxiety, State Anxiety, Debilitative Anxiety, and Facilitative Anxiety. Trait Anxiety can be defined as 'an individual's tendency toward anxiety in most situations' (Phillips 1992 as cited in Gursory and Akin 2013, p. 829) and State Anxiety in contrast, is defined as a 'transient, moment-to-moment experience of anxiety as an emotional reaction to the current situation' (Dörnyei 2005, p. 198 as cited in Gursory and Akin 2013, p. 829). Therefore, experiencing trait anxiety is to be generally anxious about many factors and to experience state anxiety is to be anxious about specific factors and situations at times. 'The term situation-specific anxiety is used to refer to the consistent and sophisticated nature of anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991c as cited by Gursory and Akin 2013, p. 829)'. Facilitative anxiety is defined by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b) as 'apprehension which is considered energizing and helpful (p. 519)'. Which, in other words, means that a certain amount of anxiety may be helpful in learning – it facilitates learning. Gass and Selinker (2008, p. 400 as cited in Gursory and Akin 2013, p. 830) also state that anxiety may have a positive effect on learning a language. They mention that anxiety 'generally has a curvilinear effect on performance: low levels help, whereas high levels hurt'. Dörnyei, (2005), Gursory and Akin (2013) argue that anxiety can

have a detrimental effect on language learning, in other words, that it can be debilitating.

On the other hand, a hybrid identity or hybridity is generally associated with negativity as it challenges the idea of ethnic and cultural purity. In colonial discourses, theorists describe hybrid identity as a 'a space in between' – a mode of resistance to the 'mother culture'. Despite the negative nuances that hybridity is associated with, as Silva (2002) emphasizes, the potential it has 'for becoming a bridging force between the diverse ethnic and caste group' could not be overlooked. Even though this research does not utilize the broader definitions of hybrid identity as it is encapsulated in the colonial discourse, it does keep to its foundational characteristic as a combination of two or more different identities. As a mode of identity, hybrid identity inhabits a 'safe terrain' within an L2 learner – 'an in between space' that enables the learner to find an accommodating position in the process of acquiring a second language. Since acquiring a second language is equal to acquiring a new identity or an extension of the identity, the new identity or the combination of the new identity and the former identity of the learner could be termed 'hybrid identity'. Thus, the term 'hybrid identity' in this research refers to this unique transition that L2 learners go through and acquire with regard to their identity. In accordance with the colonialist definitions of hybrid identity, it could be both disempowering and empowering at the same time. The hybrid identity of L2 learners may disempower them when they find it difficult to locate themselves in and belong to or adhere to a new identity that they have acquired (had to acquire) through their L2. L2 learners may find their new found hybrid identities empowering when they use them to find safer ground. As Gardner and Lambert (1972, p. 135) point out, in learning a second language, learners have to be "willing to identify with members of another ethno-linguistic group and take on very subtle aspects of their behavior" which demands identifying and integrating their socio-cultural identity. Gardner and Lambert (1972) call this 'integrative orientation'. Furthermore, there is speculation as to how L2 learners may identify themselves with an ethno-linguistic

identity when the prevalence of such an identity is ambiguous. Since English is a global language and there are many diverse varieties around the globe, a specific target reference group is difficult to be identified. Thus, it makes integrative orientation more challenging. However, Ushioda (2006, p. 150) points out that it is meaningful to conceptualize the global community as an 'external' reference group and what matters is to identity one's internal representation of him/herself as a de facto member of that global community. Hence, Ushioda (2006) emphasizes that there is a theoretical shift of focus to the internal domain of self and identity that marks quite a radical rethinking of the integrative concept.

In attempting to understand integrative orientation, Dornyei (2003) refers to the Psychological theory of 'possible selves'. He states that integrativeness might be better explained as an internal process of identification within the person's self-concept, rather than identification with an external reference group. The theory of possible selves represents individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid of becoming'. Also, if proficiency in the target language is part and parcel of one's ideal or 'ought-to' self, this will serve as a powerful motivator to learn the language because of the natural psychological desire of humans to reduce the discrepancy between the current and possible future selves. There is consistently evident that most L

attempting to pursue a hybrid identity that brings them in line with being both a global citizen and a national citizen. Coetzee-Van Rooy (2006) also critiques the concept of integrativeness in relation to learners and speakers of World English. In particular, she exposes what she calls a simplex view of identity which presupposes that learning a second language somehow results in loss of the first language and the establishment of a new simple identity as monolingual speaker of the target language. As she argues, such a simplex view seriously misrepresents the complex sociolinguistic realities of language learning, language use and cultural identity in postcolonial World English contexts, where multidimensional identities and pluralism

(rather than integration) are the norms.

As discussed in the introduction, learning English as an L2 in Sri Lanka is not a singular linear process due to the socio-cultural dimensions the language is associated with. The complex, rather problematic nature of English language education in Sri Lanka is evident through the very high (almost 50%) failure rate in English at national examinations such as the G.C. E. Ordinary Level and the G.C.E Advanced Level examinations³. Norton (2000, p. 10) uses the term investment to stress that learners invest in the target language with an anticipation that it will bring them symbolic and material resources which will enhance their cultural capital, their identity and their desires for the future. Thus, an investment in the target language is an investment in the learner's own identity. Therefore, the identity changes that learners undergo are inevitable in SLA and it is important to find out whether the hybrid element of the learner identity could be used to facilitate language learning and to overcome language anxiety. Hence, this study attempts to answer the following research questions;

- 1) How hybrid identities are used to overcome language anxiety?
- 2) What is the relationship between language anxiety and learner achievement?
- 3) What reasons trigger language anxiety among undergraduates?

The instruments of data collection and data analysis were chosen in order to find answers to these research questions. Therefore, the methods included both quantitative and qualitative means. In order to investigate the research questions formulated to address the research problem described above, the research objectives are as follows:

3. 49% failed English at G.C.E Ordinary Level in 2017 and 59% failed General English at G.C.E. Advanced Level in 2017 - Sri Lankan Government, Department of Examination website, Evaluation Reports.

- 1) To find out how hybrid identities could be used to overcome language anxiety.
- 2) To investigate the correlation between language anxiety and learner achievement.
- 3) To explore what reasons trigger language anxiety among undergraduates.

Methods and analysis

This research is set in the positivist paradigm, which lends itself to both quantitative and qualitative approaches. It is a phenomenological study as it examines the human experience in learning a second language, through the descriptions/data provided by those who undergo the experience. The research design is non-experimental. It is exploratory. The instruments used for data collection are, a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Internal and external validity were ascertained through pilot testing to establish credibility and dependability.

Sample and data

The sample was selected through Proportionate Stratified Sampling. This sampling design was used to ascertain homogeneity of the sample, by reducing heterogeneity within each selected stratum. It was selected in proportionate to ethnicity, gender and study area of the participants. Therefore, the sample consisted of 750 (approximately 25% of the sample population). Since the study uses a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis, each method triangulates the other method.

The primary data for this study was collected from the undergraduates of a national state university in Sri Lanka. Participants were selected from all the faculties of the university, except the postgraduate Faculty, since the study is on undergraduates. The sample consisted of 750 undergraduates from the faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences, Management and Commerce, Applied Sciences

and Medical Sciences (see Table 1) The questionnaire was distributed among these subjects. Using Proportionate Stratified Sampling, the number of undergraduates selected from each faculty for the distribution of the questionnaire was decided upon the number of students in each faculty to make the sample representative of the undergraduate population of the University. This undergraduate population at the university is more or less a representation of the undergraduate population of the country because of the selection criteria of the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Sri Lanka. Thus, the sample consists of undergraduates of all ethnicities: Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, and Burgher - both females and males.

Table 1. The sample

ETHNICITY	PROGRAMMS								Total	
	Arts		Management& Commerce		Medicine		Science			
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Sinhala	123	74	184	109	35	20	101	60	443	263
Tamil	4	2	6	4	1	1	3	2	14	9
More & other	4	2	5	3	1	1	3	2	13	8
GRAND TOTAL									470	280
									750	

Source: Calculated by the author

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Two different methods were used in this research to collect primary data: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire included the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) which has been validated through many years in many contexts. The items

of the FLCAS were translated into Sinhala and for Tamil speakers who did not understand Sinhala it was given in English. For those few Tamil participants who found some of the terms difficult to understand in English, the terms were explained in Tamil. Scores of the FLCAS, which reflected the LA levels of the participants were tallied with their scores for Compulsory English (this term is explained in the next paragraph) in the statistical analysis to find the correlation between Language anxiety and learner achievement.

Compulsory English is the term used in this research to refer to the study of English as a second language at universities. Sri Lankan universities offer many different undergraduate courses under different study areas such as Applied Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities, Medicine, Management and Commerce and so on. For all these courses, the first degree is not awarded unless an undergraduate acquires a general English language qualification. Irrespective of the study area (including Bachelor of Arts in English) and the level of English language competency the student has demonstrated in previous studies, the undergraduates have to acquire this qualification. This course is often termed 'Compulsory English' and the programme may vary from one university to another. However, the goals and the objectives of all these courses are very similar and serve the same purpose, which is to develop English language competency of undergraduates.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out with approximately about 10 percent of the sample who answered the questionnaire. The interviews were conducted by the researcher in the first language of the participant, that is either Sinhala or Tamil and very rarely in English.

Analysis

The current research utilized a few statistical tests as the quantitative analysis of data such as Pearson correlation coefficient test, Summary statistics/descriptive statistics and Chi-Square tests. As for the qualitative methods, interview data were analyzed using

descriptive content analysis. As the three research questions were different from one another, the study demanded different instruments of data collection and methods of data analysis. Interviews were used to answer the first research question. However, when the data was analyzed it was the questionnaire data which was analyzed first in order to explore the relationship between LA and learner performance as designated by the second research question. LA of each participant was measured using the total score the participants acquired for the FLCAS. Some of the items of the FLCAS had to be reversed. The total scores of the FLCAS were calculated and an index was created for LA and minimums and maximums were calculated. In addition, the anxiety scores were categorized into three, as high, moderate and low. The scores that the participants scored for Compulsory English were also categorized the same way. Pearson correlation coefficient test was used to investigate the correlation between LA and learner achievement. Learner achievement was measured through the scores that the participants gained for their end semester evaluations. These evaluations included (except at the Faculty of Applied Sciences) the scores of continuous assessments. The score represented the four skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking. The continuous assessments included a speaking activity such as a role play or a presentation. An index was created for LA using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) and correlation between LA and learner achievement was tested using Pearson Correlation Coefficient test.

In relation to the second research question, the analysis was conducted on the data collected through semi-structured interviews. A qualitative descriptive content analysis was carried out to analyze how hybrid identities are used to overcome LA. To answer the third research question, both quantitative and qualitative data was used to analyze reasons that trigger or contribute to LA.

Results and findings

With regard to the first research question, the results of the qualitative analysis showed that 92% of the participants agreed that it is possible to use hybrid identities to overcome LA. Results of the content analysis showed that learners overcome LA when they use an alternative identity, a combination of their own identity with another they have acquired through their L2, or an identity that they assume to have acquired temporarily.

The social and cultural mobilization the university students experience when they enter university, create within them, a cultural displacement which in turn results in hybrid identities. The analysis proved that the psychological struggle learners undergo to locate a safe social identity intensifies LA. During the interviews, many participants pointed out that they use different codes on and off campus. Thus, most participants agree that they have a hybrid identity created both by learning English and by being part of the university culture. Using the hybrid identity helps them feel less anxious. The ability to freely code-switch and code mix in this instance, gives freedom from being bound to one identity. Classroom activities such as role play and language crossing allow participants to be the 'other'.

The study also found that both competency-based LA and identity-based LA are experienced primarily due to the apprehensions regarding speaking in English. Findings reveal the linguistic inequality prevalent in the socio-cultural milieu in Sri Lankan society. This inequality makes learning English a dire need and an anxiety provoking process due to the sociolinguistic, cultural and ideological factors related to ESL in Sri Lanka. The findings bring out the intricate interrelatedness of learner identity and LA emphasizing that the significant linear negative correlation between LA and learner achievement is connected to the affective, cognitive and sociolinguistic domains of SLA. Most importantly, the findings reveal that using hybrid identities helps learners overcome LA. Especially identity-based

LA that intensifies apprehension and fear and negatively influences learner achievement.

With regard to the second research question which aimed at investigating the relationship between LA and learner achievement, when data was analysed to study the relationship between LA and learner achievement, the results indicated that there is a significant linear negative correlation between LA and learner achievement. The Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) showed a minimum of 26 and a maximum of 90. (See Table 2)

Table 2. Multiple correspondence analysis

Anxiety	Levels
Low	26-50
Medium	50-65
High	65-90

Source: Author calculated- primary data

Results of the descriptive statistics of the final scores of LA as derived from the questionnaire are shown in table 03.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics

Mean	Median	St. Dev.	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Count
41.524	35	14.64	61	23	84	750

Source: Author calculated- primary data

The second research question looked into the reasons that trigger LA. The participants were asked which skill (speaking, listening, reading, or writing) was the most anxiety provoking area. Different sub-sections were provided in relation to each skill and was inquired whether it provoked anxiety. With regard to speaking and

listening, the participants were asked about pronunciation, talking to the teacher and understanding the teacher, and with regard to reading, the participants were asked about comprehension activities and learning vocabulary. Out of many direct reasons that trigger LA, tabulated statistics (Table 4) for LA and speaking showed that most (50.13% -314/750) participants experience LA when they have to speak in the target language.

Table 4. Tabulated statistics for language anxiety and speaking

LA Levels	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	All
High	8	25	33	122	56	244
Moderate	3	57	48	160	34	302
Low	8	39	39	94	24	204
All	19	121	120	376	114	750

Source: Author calculated- primary data

Results showed a significant correlation between LA and writing;

Pearson Chi-Square = 50.702, DF = 8, P-Value = 0.000

Likelihood Ratio Chi-Square = 57.357, DF = 8, P-Value = 0.000.

However, correlation between LA, reading and listening was not significant;

Pearson Chi-Square =10.698, DF = 4, P-Value = 0.030

Likelihood Ratio Chi-Square = 10.693, DF = 4, P-Value = 0.030.

Among the indirect reasons which were studied in this research to explore whether they create LA in learners, were gender, area of study, ethnicity, religion, social background, education level, and English competency levels of parents. In the quantitative analysis, correlation between gender and LA proved very significant;

Pearson Chi-Square = 15.143, DF = 2, P-Value = 0.001.

The qualitative analysis revealed that females experience more (72%) anxiety than males (64%). This significant negative correlation and the results of the qualitative analysis show that LA and culturally-operated gender stereotypes create identity disparities in learners. In conclusion, based on the results of this current research it is clear that LA could have dire consequences on learners and their achievement. Even though many different reasons trigger LA most of those are directly connected to the socio-cultural factors related to the identities of the learners. Most importantly, the findings of this research showed that hybrid identities that learners have as a result of being L2 learners could be positively used through different classroom activities to overcome LA.

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