

Affect among Distance Foreign Language Learners

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Abstract: *Learning English at a distance is so difficult that it requires a lot of independent engagements. Research particularly into distance foreign language learning appears scanty. This study attempted to examine the affective states of EFL distance learners as they were engaged in independent learning of English. Data was collected through a comprehensive questionnaire involving wide ranging items. The results have shown that the distance EFL learners were generally apprehensive and highly anxious as they were uncertain about how much they did well in the entire course of study. In order to regulate these affective states, distance learners employed various strategies although how much these strategies helped them seemed quite unclear. The situations, which they said, exacerbated their worries included the inadequate language learning materials (modules), ill-equipped tutors, and the commitments they had with their family and work. In the light of these results, it is possible to conclude that regardless of the benefits the EFL distance learning scheme may bring to their lives, the distance learners still demand resources that can have far-reaching impacts on their learning so that their worries over the learning scheme can be regulated meaningfully.*

Keywords: EFL (English as a foreign language), distance learning, independent learning, EFL anxiety

Introduction

English is the medium of instruction in high schools and higher institutions in Ethiopia. The language also plays a pivotal role in other sectors, and hence the efforts of the government towards improving the status of English in Ethiopia could substantially be enhanced so that the quality of education can also be maintained. Bahir Dar University, one of the long standing public universities in Ethiopia, launched a distance learning programme that aims to give access to those who, in one way or the other, are unable to attend education on a regular basis. In its way so far, the University has produced thousands of professionals in multiple fields of study. One of the fields is English. Quite a number of people joined the field seeking to have a BA degree in English. They may aspire

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to become English teachers, trainers, translators, editors, public relations experts, literary analysts, readers, professional writers, journalists, or communication specialists among others. The courses are presumed to enable the trainees become communicators in general.

While the regular students have access to learning resources such as teachers and library, the distance language learners have hardly got the chance to meet with teachers on a regular basis, neither do they get library resources, as they are not yet put into online learning systems. Due to the fact that distance learners need to manage their own learning, apart from their commitments in the family and workplace, the learning on a distance basis may bring forth a feeling of some sort which I have understood as affect.

Arnold and Brown (1999, p. 1) define the term affect as "... aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which condition behaviour." Oxford (1990) also contends that the affective side of foreign language learners is one of the very important factors on learners' success or failure. Unlike the regular students, there is absence of the tutor and co-workers (students learning together) in the distance learning; this can make distance learners feel isolated which in turn may debilitate them and making them uncertain about whether they are doing well on their learning or not as they are unsure how others are doing and performing on the language learning (Hurd, 2007). In Hurd's explanations, while there are some who take the independent learning as an opportunity to exercise autonomy in learning, enjoying making errors and learning styles so private, the majority may still remain worried. Learning a foreign language is quite difficult. "...isolation, competing commitments, absence of the structure provided by face-to-face classes, and difficulty in adjusting to the new context" are some of the factors that make distance learning anxious (Bown, 2006, p. 642). A hallmark of distance language learning is that it is undertaken with no co-presence of the teacher and the student where there is no immediate environment for learning to take place while this is an opportunity for the regular students who attend their education on campus (White, 2003, 2006). The distance learning of English as a foreign language will particularly exacerbate the situation making learners uncertain about what level of proficiency is expected of them.

The Problem

Arnold and Brown (1999) contend that physiological states, such as anxiety and nervousness, have a “down-spiraling” effect on students’ language performance. This argument is refuted, however. It seems that if learners are pessimistic about their emotions such as anxiety, they would probably trigger another nervousness which may reduce their performance. This however does not always mean that “typical anxiety experienced before an important endeavor is a guide to low self-efficacy” and/or performance (Bandura, 1995, p.4). Thus, what matters is not necessarily the sense of anxiety, but the meaning learners give to it and the way they interpret it.

This time, physiological states such as anxiety, stress, depression, fatigue and mood, will control over students’ functioning (Usher & Pajares, 2007; Pajares, Johnson & Usher, 2007; Bandura, 1995). What this means is clear that these affective states can in one way or the other impact the students’ academic achievement.

In my experience as a tutor with distance learners for over a decade, I observed that distance learners appear to have lack of confidence in studying English in a distance learning mode. At times, I was a bit frustrated when I saw the learners get confused with many of the things that I was trying to explain. One thing they raised was that learning a language is not the same as learning other subjects. Besides this, they felt a little alien to the language and its rules. They were sitting to ‘get’ the language from me. In my observation, the only time these students had to learn English was the time they came for the tutorial. I frequently saw that the distance learners find it hard to overcome their commitments in their English language learning, family, and work. It is also important to note here that students in various disciplines have the cognizance about the significant roles English can play in their success studying other subjects. For English learners, the language may be seen as both a means and an end. The English courses usually require hard work that distance learners need to independently struggle to master the language and succeed in examinations. In my argument, the distance learners of English as a foreign language need to acquaint themselves with the language so that they should be able to demonstrate their communication skills in English at various circumstances. Nevertheless, the success of this expectation may depend on various factors such as the quality of the learning material (module), the capacity of the learner to read and

understand the concepts and practice the language, and so forth. I believe the entire learning process calls for learners' psychological strength and easiness. However, this has not been studied as a serious concern by researchers.

The self in distance language learning should be studied well as learners need to manage their own learning given limited language learning resources available, and such a study will have implications for learners' autonomy in EFL learning (Murphy, 2011; White, 2011). Looking into local studies, for example, students' English as a Foreign Language (EFL) proficiency might be attributed to factors such as motivation (Mulugeta, 1996), anxiety (Abate, 1996), self-regulation (Bekele, 2011), and self-efficacy belief (Dawit, 2011). Although there are similar other research attempts done in relation to EFL learning and affective states, I have not been able to find any research that attempted to investigate affect among distance learners of English in Ethiopia.

With a focus on Bahir Dar University third year English students, this study was hence intended to examine how anxious English distance learners are as they struggle to manage their own learning and what mechanisms they employ to regulate their affective states. Therefore, this study attempts to provide answers to the following research questions:

- Are distance English learners anxious in attending English courses on a distance mode? If so, what is the degree of English as a foreign language learning anxiety among the learners?
- What strategies do the English learners use to regulate their anxiety as they are engaged in independent learning?

Research Methods

Design

A descriptive survey design was employed. However, this study was not intended toward gathering comprehensive data as it is based on data from participants incidentally met for a tutorial. So long as the study tended to be descriptive, conclusions about relationships have not been drawn. Data is generally quantitative, yet there are a few qualitative elements.

Participants and sampling

The participants were third year English learners at Bahir Dar University. I had access to first and third year English students when they came for tutorial during the second semester round. I presumed that first year students had little experience and could not provide data that I may depend on for conclusions about their affective states as distance learners. Hence, third year students who came for attending tutorials in 2015 were conveniently chosen for the study. The total number of students who came from different areas for the tutorial was 41, and using comprehensive sampling the entire class was taken for the purpose of the study. Although it may be hard to find out a comprehensive data about everyone in the distance English language learning programme, this can be taken a step forward to understanding the distance EFL learners.

The learners, aged 29-50, were registered in the programme with the aim of completing their study and becoming professionals. The majority (83.3%) were teachers in elementary schools in Bahir Dar city and its surroundings. The remaining were employees of different government offices. These people were learning English on a distance basis, and their goal is to have a Bachelor's degree in English and upgrade their lives (e.g. status, income, and profession). They were all, as perhaps other distance learners, attending their education beside their family and work commitments. Their education before or then did not seem to have a far-reaching impact on their academic tactics as many were asking me what to do so as to improve their level of English proficiency.

Instrument

The instrument used to measure the level of language learning anxiety was questionnaire. There were two questionnaires employed. The questionnaires were adapted from Hurd and Xiao (2010). Some items were modified to make the language clear. The questionnaire has two main sections. The first section has 23 items on the level of anxiety of EFL learners in distance learning system. The 23 items are subdivided into three sections. The first section involves 8 items on anxiety on productive skills (speaking and writing); the second section entails 7 items on anxiety towards receptive skills (listening and reading); the third section is generally on the distance learners' affective states of learning English at a distance. The other questionnaire has 14 items on strategies these learners use to overcome or control their feelings of anxiety in

various independent language learning situations. In order to check the reliability of the instrument, using the Cronbach alpha test, the reliability of the questionnaire sub-sections ranged from 0.89-0.92 indicating that the instrument was reliable. Apart from these questions in the questionnaire, two open-ended items were added to let learners forward their general reflections on their affective conditions about learning English at a distance, and then write their feelings about our English language distance learning scheme.

Procedure

In the beginning the questionnaire was distributed to a group of people sitting for a tutorial in the previous semester with me. I then made some modifications and added two general open-ended items that I explained earlier. The reliability was then calculated, and the questionnaire was then distributed to 41 students who came for the second round tutorial during which they had to sit with their teachers (tutors) for long hours for two days. Because they had breaks in the meantime while they were attending the lessons, I requested them to take about 15 minutes to respond to the questionnaire items. The directions were clearly read and the objectives and ethical considerations were explained. Then, I got all the questionnaire papers returned. Thus, the return rate was 100%; there was no single item left blank in the close-ended items. Following the data collection, the data was fed into SPSS version 20. Finally, a statistical descriptive analysis was made. The two open-ended items were analyzed in such a way that critical reading of the respondents' answers were made, which is followed by coding the points thematically. These themes were then analyzed qualitatively. These items can be seen as the voice of the learners on their own affect in studying English at a distance.

Results

As described in the previous section, the data was collected using a comprehensive questionnaire that involved structured items and open-ended items that all focused on the distance English learners' level of anxiety in dealing with their learning at a distance. It has been emphasized that these learners should manage their own learning almost independently deprived of resources that they may need to master certain language skills.

In this section, there are three issues analyzed and discussed. First, the distance language learners' state of anxiety in learning English is analyzed. Then, the students' reactions towards their feelings as they work as distance learners are discussed. These are reactions that they responded via the open-ended items. In the end, the mechanisms students employ to regulate their anxiety are presented and discussed.

State of Anxiety among Distance English Learners

The distance English majoring students were asked to rate their level of anxiety to various items grouped under three groups, i.e. anxiety for productive skills, anxiety for receptive skills, and anxiety for learning English at a distance. Their anxiety is therefore presented and discussed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Distance EFL Learners' Level of Anxiety over Studying English

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Anxiety for Productive Skills	41	1.75	4.50	3.27	0.59
Anxiety for Receptive Skills	41	2.00	4.43	3.32	0.66
Anxiety for Learning English at a Distance	41	1.88	4.50	3.16	0.66

In Table 1 above, the levels of distance EFL learners' anxiety are presented over three areas, i.e. productive skills (speaking and writing), receptive skills (listening and reading), and learning English at a distance. As can be seen in the table, the mean scores of the learners' anxiety were 3.27 (SD= .59) for productive skills, 3.32 (SD= .66) receptive skills, and 3.16 (SD= .66) for learning English at a distance in general. What can be said in general is of course the data have demonstrated almost similar results showing that the mean scores calculated in a 5 point Likert scale excelled the average score, 3, which means that the learners were slightly highly anxious in each of the learning aspects mentioned. An example of anxiety over productive skills used in the instrument was 'I'm always worried about making mistakes when I'm speaking English,' and an example item for receptive skills is 'I get upset when I come across complicated structures in my reading.' The anxiety level for receptive skills is higher than the anxiety level for productive skills. This could be perhaps because the distance learners usually encounter the reading challenges as they independently struggle to getting meaning out of written texts (modules) and when they come for tutorials, the majority of their time is spent over listening to the tutor's lecture. Conversely, their

access for exercising the productive skills could be limited that learners may only use them in cases of examinations and assignments if assignments or examinations have such components. The other section in the instrument included items related to learners' feelings about learning EFL at a distance in general. An example of items in this section was 'I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to master to learn English well.' The learners were found to have a moderately high anxiety over learning English at a distance.

Learners' Feelings towards EFL Learning at a Distance

The respondents were asked via open-ended questions to write down their feelings and reactions to the distance EFL learning programme at Bahir Dar University. The responses they forwarded thematically categorized and qualitatively analyzed as in hereunder.

Theme 1: Distance Learning as an Opportunity

The respondents said that the distance English language learning gave them an opportunity to have access to education which, they believed, was accessible only for those in the cities. That Bahir Dar University opened a distance learning scheme in English helped them to improve their life as they changed their certificate from a diploma to a degree. The distance learners emphatically underscored that the distance scheme could help them upgrade their education level and earn a better salary. One of the respondents mentioned, "... I will have a degree through the distance learning...this is an important thing for me to get a degree..." (St 3). Another student also highlighted this stating "I feel very well to change [my paper] within a short period of time." (St 32)

This is shared by many others. The impression I understood from such responses is that the learners, regardless of the knowledge and skills they ought to be equipped with, prioritize the certificate and improve their living standard and wellbeing. This is supported by the contention of a respondent as he wrote:

Learning English at a distance program [does] not change the learners' mind as well as it is difficult to get knowledgeable persons in a distance learning program ... especially, a study of English [as a foreign language] could hardly be effective... the main goal is to get a job or be promoted. (St 16)

Nevertheless, it can be deduced that they feel comfortable about the distance learning scheme as many saw the distance English learning as an opportunity although they were not working as anticipated.

Theme 2: Tutors and tutoring – provoking uneasiness

The learners mentioned that the distance English language learning scheme is difficult for them, and a number of attributions impeded them from succeeding as EFL learners. One of the students, St 16, wrote that learning English at a distance “... is so much difficult in many terms such as in time, economy, etc.” (St 16).

Time shortage was one of the factors they experienced as a challenge to work with the modules. They mentioned they could not read the entire module partly because their time was usually spent over other commitments such as family and work. Consequently, the learners expected high from the tutors.

In other comments, St 21 and St 14 blamed the tutor and tutoring procedures as these factors exacerbated their EFL learning anxiety. Let us see these two individuals’ feelings which, of course are shared by many others too. “The teachers who are teaching us [tutors] are not well ready when they come to class...[besides], the modules’ preparation and distribution is not done timely.” (St 21)

St 14 also put the challenges in a list of tutors’ problems that gave her hard times in her independent learning of EFL:

- Many teachers [tutors] teach fast.
- They [skip] many topics.
- They are not good at explanation.

These statements indicate that the entire problem rests on the tutor’s inability to adequately demonstrate the topics within the time given. It is understood from what students raised here that they are almost dependents on the tutorial sessions although they did not seem to have these sessions as helpful as they expected.

Theme 3: Dissatisfaction with What Was Available for Them

In some cases, it was learnt that there is a sort of distance learners’ dissatisfaction with the modules prepared and the tutorials given. Because they are struggling to master English as a foreign language

through independent learning, they would like to have access to various other resources that supplement their efforts of practicing skills such as listening and speaking in authentic ways. One of the respondents, St 15, for example, put this as “The modules are insufficient [for us] to practise day to day conversation. ... TV and video [should be incorporated] in our listening programmes... additional reference English books [should be] prepared. The other person, St 17, wrote that the distance English learning scheme is “a challenge because it is not supported by practical training [on the language]

Learners’ Anxiety Regulatory Mechanisms

Mechanisms the participants employed to regulate their anxiety were compiled and presented in the following table.

Table 2: Learners’ Ways of Controlling their Nervousness

No.	Item description	Always	Frequently	sometimes	Rarely	never	Mean
1	Use positive self-talk (e.g. I can do it; it doesn’t matter if I make mistakes; others also make mistakes).	9	10	12	5	5	3.32
2	Attend face-to-face tutorials as often as possible.	15	13	8	3	2	3.88
3	Actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings or trying to speak or write, even though I might make some mistakes.	5	10	16	9	1	3.22
4	Tell myself, when I write, that I can check my writing to correct mistakes.	5	10	16	5	5	3.12
5	Pay more attention to my weak points in routine study, such as working out ways of remembering English vocabulary more efficiently, going over difficult grammar points, reading after the recording, etc.	10	10	14	3	4	3.46
6	Use relaxation techniques e.g. deep breathing, consciously speaking more slowly when I have to do presentations.	7	11	12	9	2	3.29
7	Note down difficult points and turn to reference materials, other learners, or my tutors for solutions.	5	8	13	10	5	2.95
8	Become aware of the physical signs of stress that might affect my English learning.	2	16	15	5	3	3.22
9	Make the best of every opportunity to practice using English.	5	7	14	10	5	2.93
10	Share my worries with other learners.	4	14	17	5	1	3.36
11	Tell myself when I speak that it won’t take long.	3	10	18	7	3	3.07
12	Give myself a reward or treat when I do well.	13	17	6	3	2	3.88
13	Write down my feelings in a diary or notebook.	1	5	5	12	18	2.00
14	Let my tutor/personal supervisor know that I am anxious.	4	4	11	10	12	2.46

The distance learners were asked to choose how often they used each of the anxiety controlling strategies. They were also asked to mention any other strategies they used to regulate their sense of anxiety though they added nothing to the list.

According to the results put in Table 2 above, the distance learners indicated that they used almost all strategies to regulate their nervousness during their entire time as distance learners of English as a foreign language. Nevertheless, they tended towards using some more frequently than others. Learners, for instance, were highly reliant on certain strategies such as items 12 (give myself a reward or treat when I do well, mean= 3.88), 2 (attend face-to-face tutorials as often as possible, mean= 3.88), 5 (pay more attention to my weak points in routine study, such as working out ways of remembering English vocabulary more efficiently, going over difficult grammar points, reading after the recording, etc), and 10 (share my worries with other learners). The majority of the strategies were used moderately. The learners said they used the strategies 'sometimes'. Conversely, they employed a few strategies, for instance those stated in Items 13 (write down my feelings in a diary or notebook, mean= 2.00) and 14 (let my tutor/personal supervisor know that I am anxious, mean= 2.46). These results implied that although every strategy was used, the learners did not seem to share their worries with their tutors or personal supervisors (if they have any), but with their friends. It is also seen here that although students raised the mediocre efforts in offering tutorial sessions, they used the face-to-face tutorial sessions as a way to get out of EFL learning anxiety.

Discussion

Autonomy is one of the biggest assets learning through a distance scheme could bring to learners (Andrade & Bunker, 2009; Kostina, 2013). Nevertheless, distance learners could not have the experience which would normally be shared by face-to-face learners in the regular program.

The data analyzed has shown that the distance EFL learners were generally apprehensive as they had uncertainties about the contents they studied and the techniques they should employ throughout. The learners reported that they used various strategies moderately in order to regulate their apprehension. Inadequate language learning materials (modules), ill-equipped tutors, and the commitments they had with their family and work were among the situations that created burden among distance

foreign language learners. These findings are in congruence with some previous studies that focused on distance language learning (see Hurd and Xiao, 2006; Xiao and Hurd, 2007). Furthermore, Mills, Pajares, and Herron (2006) state that strategies distance foreign learners use to combat anxiety would enable the learners to become efficacious about learning the language independently. Mills et al. pose their concerns about such measurement procedures of affect. They say, self-reported measurements may not be adequate to tell much about what the exact feelings of the distance learners could be.

This study indicated that learning English in a distance is a very apprehensive condition which learners, apart from other socio-economic challenges, would find it a burden. This might tell how much the distance learners suffer from anxiety and uneasiness as they were engaged in reading and understanding the contents to the level the teachers (tutors) normally expect, which may cause anxiety, a potential threat for their achievement.

Conclusion

The results in this study have generally shown that the distance EFL learners felt anxious about learning English in an independent state. They seemed to be in a state of anxiety and uneasiness in learning English at a distance where they have no or limited access to authentic communication environments. Nevertheless, the learners attempted to regulate these feelings by employing several strategies, yet the results revealed that learning English in a distance is an insuperable business learners are struggling with. Future research should explore how the distance learners actually deal with learning English. The research efforts may look into possible uses of task oriented learning and computer-mediated communication in EFL learning for distance learners. Qualitative enquiries that attempt to examine the distance learning conditions in various disciplines could also help us broaden our understanding. As this is a narrow scale study and can hardly be generalized, researchers should look into the multifaceted features of learning EFL in a distance.

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