

Effects of Skype Conversations on the Students' Foreign Language Anxiety Level at the School of Foreign Languages at Thai Nguyen University

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Abstract

The present study aimed to examine the impact of using Skype conversations on English majors' levels of foreign language anxiety. The research adopted an experimental approach to investigate this impact. The Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLAS) by Horwitz et al (1986) was administered to 20 students from the School of Foreign Languages - Thai Nguyen university. However, the research adopted only four factors of FL anxiety namely, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, afraid to make mistakes and feeling unable to deal with the tasks with adapted 17 items. The findings indicated that SCMC like Skype could increase opportunities for students' oral communication outside their classroom, which contributed to their lower anxiety in language learning.

Keywords - Skype, anxiety, communication apprehension, fear, communication

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Horwitz [6] and MacIntyre [9], anxiety affects language learning and findings have shown that anxiety in language learning is one kind of anxiety [4]. Horwitz [6] emphasizes that anxiety has proven to have great potential to influence not only a second language learners but also a foreign language learner. Indeed, Horwitz [6] shows language anxiety is one of the vital factors impacting language learning. He points out the reason for this fact is that foreign language anxiety negatively interferes with the process of language learning that leads to difficulties in oral proficiency. Therefore, it is suggested that English teachers should alleviate this type of negative interference by innovative approaches [2].

According to Kern [7], the negative effects of anxiety may be reduced by applying Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Levy and Stockwell [8] show that the advent of technology has made CALL possible to meet the needs of foreign language learners in different contexts over past twenty years. The CALL actually affects all aspects of the learning process such as encouraging learning experiences to empower students to become

independent learners, increasing student motivation, giving access to instructional materials at any time, extending the learning environment by including resources from the World Wide Web, and promoting global understanding. Among all software applications, Skype is a fairly successful tool designed to make communication between instructors and foreign language learners more convenient, faster and more efficient.

Despite some studies that examined the effects of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on learners' anxiety, the results of these studies have been mixed. Navarro [10] investigated the effect of video CMC (VCMC), written CMC (WCMC), and face-to-face (FTF) on second language (L2) learners' anxiety. The study aimed at comparing the number of words and turns produced by seventy-nine subjects from intermediate Spanish classes and their level of anxiety. The subjects were required to complete three jigsaw tasks in all the communication modes. Navarro used a state anxiety questionnaire as the data collection instrument. Besides, the transcripts of the conversations were also used to explain the findings of the study. The results revealed that there was no difference in number of words and turns between FTF communication and video CMC. However, the number of words and turns were significantly higher during written CMC. The level of state anxiety was significantly lower during written CMC than during video CMC and face to face. On the other hand, Pichette [12] investigated learners' anxiety in a language course through two different delivery modes (distance learning or face to face). The study showed that anxiety levels were not different between the learners of both modes. Therefore, this study did not prove the hypothesis that the use of computer-mediated communication may reduce anxiety levels.

Specifically, the effect of using Skype software on students' anxiety level has not been widely explored by researchers in Vietnam in particular and in the world in general. Typically, Terantino [13] examined the differences in the foreign language anxiety levels between students participating in oral interviews in an over four year Russian course conducted face to face and students participating in

oral interviews via Skype videoconferencing. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) [5] was adapted and administered, followed by interviews with the students. The findings showed that anxiety levels between face to face communication and Skype videoconferencing were not different. Therefore, it is suggested that Skype videoconferencing may replace face to face communication because it positively affected the students' anxiety levels.

This body of literature illustrates mixed results in terms of positive effect of computer-mediated communication, especially Skype videoconferencing, on reducing learners' anxiety level. Besides, it is a fact that up to now there have been no research in Vietnam exploring the effects of Skype videoconferencing on the levels of anxiety among English major students. For these above reasons, the researcher would like to address this gap by investigating the effect of Skype on the students' anxiety level with English majors as participants at SFL.

In this study, the issue was looked into thoroughly in a context, at School of Foreign Languages (SFL) at Thai Nguyen University in a mountainous province in Vietnam. The first year English majors at SFL had almost restricted opportunities to have access to English inside and outside the classroom. Indeed, the students had only two periods of developing oral proficiency (approximately 2 hours every week). Besides, there was a shortage of foreign teachers, compared with thousands of students at school; therefore, the exposure to the target language was entirely limited. In order to create a variety of authentic English language inputs for the students to reduce the students' anxiety level, SFL has organized some out-of-class projects, one of which was VietSkype project. VietSkype was a project that promoted the students' speaking proficiency through virtual conversations on Skype. The researchers would like to examine the effects of Skype conversations on the students' anxiety level. Specifically, the research question of the study was as follows:

To what extent does VietSkype project affect the first year English majors' anxiety level?

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Subjects

The participants taking part in this study consisted of 14 volunteers from English speaking countries and 14 first-year students majoring in English at School of Foreign Languages at Thai Nguyen University in the first semester of the academic year 2016-2017. They were purposively chosen to participate in the study. The reason was that the subjects were at their first semester of specializing in English, so the training they would receive during

the period of the project might result in their progress in their intercultural competence.

B. Data Collection Instrument

The FLCAS is very popular and has been adopted by many language researchers who conduct studies in the area of language anxiety in different countries. Therefore, the present study was not an exception and would use FLCAS as one of the data collection instruments to investigate the levels of foreign language anxiety among SFL students. However, the researchers would use the adapted FLCAS version from [13] because there were similarities between his study and the present study. Firstly, the subjects of the studies were university students. Secondly, the project was related to the students' listening and speaking skills, so the questionnaire would include only the survey items that were closely relates to speaking, listening skills and Skype videoconferencing.

There were 17 question items and a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). The respondent's anxiety in English classrooms was revealed through the total score of the FLCAS. If the score was high, the respondent's anxiety level was high, too. The FLCAS was administered to the subjects in two different periods of time: at the mid-term of the course and at the end of the course. In order to facilitate students' understanding of the questionnaire, this instrument was conducted in the participants' native language, Vietnamese, to avoid unnecessary misreading and miscomprehension.

The four factors of anxiety and their corresponding items are shown in the following table.

TABLE 1
Factors of Anxiety and their Corresponding Items

| No | Questionnaire items | Factors of anxiety |
|----|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | 1, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16 | Communication apprehension |
| 2 | 6, 8, 12, 17 | Fear of negative evaluation |
| 3 | 2, 11 | Afraid of making mistakes in class |
| 4 | 7, 15 | Feeling unable to deal with the task |

C. Data Collection Procedure

In the project, Vietnamese students were paired with English speaking volunteers. Each pair scheduled conversations on Skype for 12 weeks with 12 topics, each of which required 45 minutes of communication through Skype between Vietnamese students and volunteers every week. Due to time difference, participants had time adjustments.

The tasks were designed based on such components as *Goals, Input, Conditions, Procedures,*

and *Predicted outcomes* [3]. The course was divided into two phases as follows:

In Phase 1 (from week 1 to week 8), the topics were food, language and learning, health, film and art, sports, transport, environment, and festival. In Phase 2 (from week 9 to week 12), the course concentrated on the following topics: work, travel and holiday, people and free time, and technology. The students were given in advance the topics so that they could practice before the real online call took place.

The reason for dividing the course into two different phases was that the researchers wanted their students to move from controlled practice to the level of learning awareness and self-management skills. Specifically, Phase 1 prescribed a particular structure the participants had to follow strictly. In Phase 2, the students “had a great deal of freedom to decide what to talk about, in what depth, when to talk about it, what other tasks or activities they might wish to engage in, what kind of language feedback or error correction they wish to give and receive” [11]. For example, in Phase 1, both students and volunteers were asked to find two visuals that will represent the theme of the topic (e.g., *Google* images, their own pictures): one for Vietnam and the other for the volunteer’s country. They were also asked to prepare five discussion questions for each visual image. They had to produce a list of at least 5 differences and 5 similarities between 2 cultures in terms of the topic in the pictures or photos. In contrast, in Phase 2, the volunteers and students should prepare their own questions relating to the topic provided every week to make a conversation. As a result, the students could develop their autonomy in the language learning process.

The project objectives and tasks were presented in the opening session. Later, the students were trained how to use Skype in chatting with foreign volunteers. Before the official sessions, the students were informed of all issues concerned with the project: tasks and schedules, etc. Video recording of conversations was used to keep evidence of these oral interactions.

D. Data Analysis

After the researcher distributed FLCAS questionnaires to the participants, the questionnaire were then retrieved and analyzed. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) would be used to analyze the quantitative data such as the means, the standard deviation, etc. Also, the Likert scales ranging from 1 to 5 in FLCAS [5] below were used to measure the students’ anxiety levels in the pre/post results.

TABLE 2
The Levels of Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

| Means | Levels of foreign language learning anxiety |
|-------------|---|
| 1.00 - 1.49 | No anxiety or strongly little anxiety (NA) |

| | |
|-------------|-----------------------|
| 1.50 - 2.49 | Little anxiety (LA) |
| 2.50 - 3.49 | Moderate anxiety (MA) |
| 3.50 - 4.49 | High anxiety (HA) |
| 4.50 - 5.00 | Strongly anxiety (SA) |

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the 17 items under four categories in the questionnaire (Table 1), the levels of FLL anxiety (Table 2), and descriptive statistics analysed from SPSS, the students’ levels of FL anxiety before and after the course were reported as follows.

The results from Table 3 uncovered that the students reported a great reduction in their anxiety levels for all the factors via Skype conversations with their volunteers before and after the course, from high anxiety (M= 3.72) to little anxiety (M= 2.24). Interestingly, the students experienced much lower levels of anxiety at the end of the program than those at the beginning regarding *Communication apprehension* (M= 4.03; M= 1.90) and *Feeling unable to deal with tasks* (M= 3.86; M= 1.64). However, there were slight changes in the levels of anxiety from high to moderate level in terms of *Fear of negative evaluation* (M= 3.93; M= 2.61) and *Being afraid to make mistakes* (M= 3.04; M= 2.79). These findings were supported by some studies [10] [13] which revealed that virtual conversations positively affect the learners’ anxiety levels in their FL learning which is “a detrimental factor negatively correlated with oral language learning” [1].

TABLE 3
Descriptive Statistics and Students’ General Levels of FL Anxiety in the Pre/Post Course

| Factors of FL anxiety | N | Pre-course | | Post-course | |
|--|----|-------------|---------------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| | | Mean | Levels of anxiety | Mean | Levels of anxiety |
| Communication apprehension | 14 | 4.03 | High anxiety | 1.90 | Little anxiety |
| Feeling unable to deal with tasks | 14 | 3.86 | High anxiety | 1.64 | Little anxiety |
| Fear of negative evaluation | 14 | 3.93 | High anxiety | 2.61 | Moderate anxiety |
| Being afraid to make mistakes | 14 | 3.04 | Moderate anxiety | 2.79 | Moderate anxiety |
| Overall means & levels of anxiety | | 3.72 | High anxiety | 2.24 | Little anxiety |

As clearly seen from Table 4, the substantial variations between the pre- and post-program scores were demonstrated in all of the individual items of *Communication apprehension* with the means of the pre-questionnaire from M= 4.29 to M=3.79, while the means of the post questionnaire were from M= 2.36 to M=1.64. Those mean scores for the students showed

that they were highly anxious or deeply self-conscious about speaking in English with the volunteers via Skype at the beginning of the program, but slightly anxious or self-conscious at the end, for example “I was nervous speaking English with the volunteer during the Skype conversation.” (M= 4.29 & M= 2.29 respectively); “I felt very self-conscious about speaking English during the Skype conversation because the volunteer was not present physically.” (M= 4.00 & M= 1.64 respectively). Similarly, the students revealed their little anxiety about not understanding all the language input at the end of the course despite their high levels of anxiety at the beginning course, such as “It frightened me when I didn’t understand what the volunteer spoke in English during the Skype conversation.” (M=3.93, M= 1.79); “I was nervous when I didn’t understand every word the volunteer said in English during the Skype conversation.” (M=3.86, M=1.93). These results reject the students’ belief that to comprehend the target language messages, it is of necessity for them to understand every word that is spoken.

In terms of *Feeling unable to deal with tasks*, Students stated that after the course they felt less anxious about their inability of dealing with the speaking tasks with the volunteers compared with that at the beginning of the course. They endorsed the statements “During the Skype conversation I was so nervous that I forgot things I know about English.” (M= 3.79, M= 1.50) and “I felt overwhelmed by the number of rules I had to learn to speak English with the volunteer.”(M=3.93, M= 1.79). The student responses to the two items support the view that “FL anxiety is a distinct set of beliefs, perceptions and feelings in response to FL learning ... not merely a composite of other anxieties” [5].

With reference to *Fear of negative evaluation*, the students reported that they had less fear of being negatively evaluated by their volunteers at the end of the program than that at the beginning of the program, for example, “I was afraid that the volunteer would laugh at me when listening to my English.” (M= 3.86, M=1.64). However, they were still very anxious about being less competent than the other peers after the course. They said “I kept thinking that the other students are better at English than I am” (M= 3.93, M= 3.86), or “I think the other students completed their Skype conversations with their volunteers better” (M= 4.00, M= 2.93). Obviously, the anxious students still hold negative attitudes toward being negatively evaluated by their partners and teachers and feel themselves inferior to their peers in language learning, all of which are more likely for them to have failure in FL learning.

As indicated in Table 2, the students were found less afraid of making mistakes while speaking with their volunteers at the end of the program, such as “I worried about making mistakes during the Skype conversation.” (M= 4.07, M= 2.07); “I was afraid

that the volunteer was going to correct every mistake I made in English during the Skype conversation.” (M=4.00, M=1.50). The results lend further support to the view that learners can feel more comfortable to be able to communicate successfully with people who are not physically present regardless of their mistakes [13].

TABLE 4
Descriptive Statistics and Students’ FL Anxiety Levels in 4 Factors in the Pre/Post Course

| Factors of FL anxiety | N | Pre-course/ Post-course | M | D | OA |
|---|---|----------------------------|-----|-----|----|
| Items of Communication Apprehension | | | | | |
| 1. I didn’t feel quite sure of myself when I was speaking with the volunteer during the Skype conversation. | 4 | Pre | .21 | .11 | A |
| | | Post | .64 | .13 | A |
| 3. I felt my heart pounding when I was going to speak English during the Skype conversation. | 4 | Pre | .79 | .43 | A |
| | | Post | .71 | .61 | A |
| 4. It frightened me when I didn’t understand what the volunteer spoke in English during the Skype conversation. | 4 | Pre | .93 | .47 | A |
| | | Post | .79 | .43 | A |
| 5. I started to panic when I had to speak with the volunteer without | 4 | Pre | .00 | .39 | A |
| | | Post | .14 | .36 | A |

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|------|-----|-----|---|---|---|------|-----|-----|---|
| preparatio ns. | | | | | | Skype conversati on. | | | | | |
| 9. I was nervous speaking English with the volunteer during the Skype conversati on. | 4 | Pre | .29 | .61 | A | Items of Feeling Unable to Deal with Tasks | | | | | |
| | | Post | .29 | .61 | A | 7. During the Skype conversati on I was so nervous that I forgot things I know about English. | 4 | Pre | .79 | .58 | A |
| 10. I did not feel confident when I spoke English during the Skype conversati on. | 4 | Pre | .21 | .43 | A | | | Post | .50 | .52 | A |
| | | Post | .36 | .63 | A | 15. I felt overwhelmed by the number of rules I had to learn to speak English with the volunteer. | 4 | Pre | .93 | .47 | A |
| 13. I felt very self-conscious about speaking English during the Skype conversati on because the volunteer was not present physically. | 4 | Pre | .00 | .78 | A | Items of Fear of Negative Evaluation | | | | | |
| | | Post | .64 | .63 | A | 6. I think the other students completed their Skype conversati ons with their volunteers better. | 4 | Pre | .00 | .96 | A |
| 14. I felt more tense and nervous speaking with the volunteer via the Skype. | 4 | Pre | .00 | .55 | A | | | Post | .93 | .13 | A |
| | | Post | .64 | .63 | A | 8. It embarrassed me to answer in English to the volunteer during the Skype conversati on. | 4 | Pre | .93 | .73 | A |
| 16. I was nervous when I didn't understand every word the volunteer spoke in English during the | 4 | Pre | .86 | .66 | A | | | Post | .00 | .55 | A |
| | | Post | .93 | .47 | A | 12. I kept thinking that the other students are better at English | 4 | Pre | .93 | .47 | A |
| | | | | | | Post | | .86 | .53 | A | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|------|-----|-----|---|
| than I am. | | | | | |
| 17. I was afraid that the volunteer would laugh at me when listening to my English. | 4 | Pre | .86 | .53 | A |
| | | Post | .64 | .50 | A |
| Items of Being afraid to make mistakes | | | | | |
| 2. I worry about making mistakes during the Skype conversation. | 4 | Pre | .07 | .73 | A |
| | | Post | .07 | .62 | A |
| 11. I was afraid that the volunteer was going to correct every mistake I made in English during the Skype conversation. | 4 | Pre | .00 | .55 | A |
| | | Post | .50 | .52 | A |

Our findings indicated that FL anxiety was experienced by a great number of students; SMC like Skype therefore could increase opportunities for students' oral communication outside their classroom, which contributed to their lower anxiety in language learning.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

It is undeniable that foreign language anxiety has been considered as one of the most important affective factors in foreign language learning. The findings of the study were so meaningful for teachers and learners about using technology to reduce students' foreign language anxiety. It is suggested that Vietnamese learners could incorporate Skype videoconferencing into the curriculum in order to develop oral competence. Besides, the tasks to be implemented should be engaging and motivating to make learners participate actively in the Skype sessions.

Although the researchers have clarified some important points regarding the effects of Skype chats on students' anxiety levels in English classrooms, there are some limitations and also need further

research to be done. First and foremost, the sample of subjects was rather small in size and limited time was available, which limits the generalizability of the findings. More research in the future needs to be carried out with more number of participants in order to have more opinions from different participants. Second, the study applied Skype conversations for an online English speaking course for English majors; therefore, the results may not be suitable for other situations. More research should be done to examine the effects of Skype chats on different learners' levels of anxiety.

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