

Anxiety Experienced by Adult ESL Learners in Sri Lanka: A Case of First Year Undergraduates of University of Peradeniya

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According to theorists like R. C. Gardner and Stephen Krashen, extra-linguistic factors with socio-psychological overtones play as much a critical role as linguistic factors in teaching/learning ESL/EFL. Anxiety has been identified as one of the aforementioned affective factors that can have a significantly negative impact on language acquisition/learning process of students. As such, the current study investigates the nature and scale of anxiety experienced by first year undergraduates of Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, belonging to groups of basic level competence in English. The study was exploratory in nature and both quantitative and qualitative data were collected for the purpose of the research. Questionnaires were distributed using the purposive sampling method i.e. 25 questionnaires were distributed among undergraduates whose L1 was Sinhala while another 25 were distributed among undergraduates whose L1 was Tamil. Also, interviews were conducted with 10 instructors that teach undergraduates of basic level competence in English. The quantitative and qualitative data collected through questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive and inferential analysis. The qualitative data gathered through interviews were analyzed using the discourse and thematic analysis methods and then the data triangulation method was deployed. The analysis of data from the questionnaires revealed that students whose L1 is Tamil face significantly higher levels of anxiety (88%) compared to students whose L1 is Sinhala (48%). The students faced anxiety in the form of communication apprehension/ anxiety, test anxiety, anxiety regarding negative evaluation and anxiety in the ESL classroom environment. These findings were corroborated through findings from the interviews with the instructors. While the study provides insight into the intensity and scale of anxiety experienced by adult ESL learners of tertiary level education, it also highlights on the role of the student L1 as a defining factor in ESL learner anxiety.

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