

Taiwanese EFL Nursing Students' English Learning Beliefs and Anxiety

Yen-Ju Hou

Shu Zen Junior College of Medicine and Management, Taiwan
luck0228@yahoo.com.tw

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Abstract

As in a global village and English has been widely used in medical terminology, medical records and in professional communication, it's quite essential to have good English ability for those people standing in the front line of healthcare, in particular, the nurses. However, how do nursing students outside of English speaking countries think of English learning and what are the effects on their English performance? The paper aims to investigate (1) how Taiwanese EFL nursing students think of English learning, (2) what their anxiety are, and (3) the effects of beliefs and anxiety on their English performance. Participants are 733 nursing students in a private medical college in south Taiwan, including 78 males (11%) and 655 females (89%). The research instruments include a set of English Proficiency Test and questionnaires dealing with the Beliefs about Language Learning (Horwitz, 1988), and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986). All available data are processed by SPSS 15. Findings show that students' beliefs do affect their anxiety and negatively relate to their English performance. It's expected that the findings can provide teachers and educators with more understanding about students' individual differences in English learning for nursing schools outside of English speaking countries.

Keywords: nursing students, beliefs, anxiety, English performance

1. Introduction

Many learners regard foreign language learning as an anxiety-provoking experience which affects their language performance in one way or another. Hence, the role of anxiety on foreign language learning has been attracting lots of attention from the mid-1970s, in particular, since the early 2000s, there have been a growing number of studies of Asian learners of Japan (Andrade & Williams, 2009), China (Na, 2007), Taiwan (Hou, et al., 2012; Wu, 2010), Korea (Kim, 2000), Vietnam (Linh, 2011), the Philippines (Sioson, 2011) and many others.

In the past few decades, researchers have become more interested in the study of the acquisition of second or foreign languages. They have paid more attention to investigating the affective variables, which are believed to be teachable and trainable. Previous studies have indicated how students think about language learning, how those beliefs related to their learning anxiety (Horwitz, 1990), as well as how some beliefs are conflicting among students of different institutions (Kern, 1995), and different culture settings (Yang, 1992). It seems that no matter what participants of those studies are, it's obvious that students have some misconceptions toward language learning itself, which have some impacts on their anxiety and English learning. Particularly, as in a global village and English has been widely used in medical terminology, medical records and in professional communication, it's quite essential to have good English ability for those people standing in the front line of healthcare, in particular, the nurses. However, how do nursing students outside of English speaking countries think of English learning and what are the effects on their English performance?

2. Literature Review

Reviews of anxiety and beliefs about foreign language learning are described below:

Anxiety about foreign language learning--Learning anxiety is "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning" (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p.128), which is likely to arouse in language learning stages: input, processing, and output (Tobias, 1986) and affect language learners' performance. MacIntyre (1995) claimed that "Language learning is a cognitive activity that relies on encoding, storage, and retrieval processes, and anxiety can interfere with each of these..." (p.96). Language anxiety's affect on language learning is two-fold: positive and negative. In terms of its positive effect, it is suggested that some anxiety can improve performance (Scovil, 1978), and influence both the quality of performance and the amount of effort invested in it

(Eysenck, 1979). On the other hand, anxiety is relative to some other variables such as motivation, attitude, and strategy use, as well as language learning outcome (Hou, et al., 2012; Wu, 2010).

Belief about foreign language learning -Students of all ages have opinions about materials, instructions, learning situations, teachers, and classmates. Individual's opinion about learning may not be the same, and even the learners themselves sometimes have conflicting beliefs about learning. Students bring those concepts into classroom and are affected by them. From their beliefs, we can understand students' expectation of commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with their language classes (Horwitz, 1988). Yorio (1986) reported that students' beliefs are determined by their proficiency level and language background, especially the latter "most often appears to result in marked differences" (p.682). Another finding dealing with student's conflicting beliefs is that, on one hand, "students indicated a marked preference for courses stressing communicative competence", but on the other hand, "they show obvious reluctance to abandon very traditional teaching techniques" (Yorio, 1986, p.672). Other studies, like Horwitz (1988), Yang (1992), and Kern (1995) assessed students' and teachers' beliefs or role expectations and claimed that some similarities and contrasts do exist. Among them, Horwitz is the first to systematically identify beliefs about language learning. In 1988, Horwitz developed The Belief About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI). Since then, the BALLI has become a widely adopted instrument to measure learners' opinions about difficulty, aptitude, nature, strategy use, and expectation of language learning. Horwitz (1988) claimed that some students' beliefs are very optimistic and unrealistic, and even conflict with real language learning. Kern (1995) pointed out that there are some mismatches between teachers' and students' beliefs, as well as even students of different universities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this study are to explore (1) how Taiwanese EFL nursing students think of English learning, (2) what their anxiety are, and (3) the effects of beliefs and anxiety on their English performance.

3.2 Research Design

The research design is a descriptive study. The methodology of descriptive study was chosen as the research design because of its particular strength and advantages in being able to set an objective "to determine the factors, and relationships among the factors that have resulted in the current behavior or status of the study" (Gay, 1992, p.236).

3.3 Subjects

A total of 733 nursing students in a private five-year medical junior college in south Taiwan served as subjects, including 78 male students (11%) and 655 female students (89%). They were arranged to fill out a set of questionnaires dealing with their beliefs and anxiety about English learning, adopted from Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (Horwitz, 1988), and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), respectively. In addition, a General English Proficiency Test, CEF A2, consisting of listening part and reading part, was used to presenting their English performance.

3.4 Process

In that five-year medical junior college, English was a require course in the first three years. There were 5 departments in the college, but only Nursing Department was chosen for the purposes of the study to investigate nursing students' beliefs and anxiety about English learning. All the first 3 graders of the Nursing Department participated in the study, including 261 first graders (35%), 223 second graders (30%), and 260 third graders (35%).

4. Findings and discussions

Findings include the reliability of the questionnaire, students' English scores, nursing students' beliefs and anxiety about English learning, the impacts of beliefs on anxiety and English performance as well. The findings and discussions of the study are described below:

4.1 The reliability of the questionnaire

The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire is found to be Cronbach's Alpha = .75 (Item number=20). According to Gay and Airasian (2003), "If a test were perfectly reliable, the reliability coefficient would be 1.00....However, no test is perfect reliable." (p.141). Hence, the result of .75 reliability coefficient indicates that the research instrument is acceptable and reliable.

4.2 Nursing students' English scores

The results show that students' English scores are not satisfactory. The mean score of listening, reading and total score is 54.88, 39.49, and 94.38, respectively, while the full score is 120, 120, and 240, respectively. Obviously, students' English performance is not satisfactory, especially reading. The findings are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Nursing students' English scores

	N	listening	high	low	reading	high	low	total	high	low
1 st grader	255	55.02	120	8	38.58	99	4	93.6	219	35
2 nd grader	203	55.34	116	20	40.51	95.2	4	95.86	204.6	34.2
3 rd grader	250	54.36	100	20	39.59	98.6	13.6	93.97	198.6	45.6
average		54.88	120	8	39.49	99	4	94.38	219	34.2
Full score		120			120			240		

4.3 Nursing students' beliefs

The findings show that students strongly believe that language learning involves a lot of memorization, they shouldn't say anything in English until they can say it correctly, the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words, it is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it, and it is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation. Comparatively, they are with weaker beliefs that if beginning students are permitted to make errors in English without correction, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly (to correct errors) later on, people who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages, the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar, they have a special ability for learning foreign languages, and the most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from their native language. The results are shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Nursing students' beliefs about foreign language learning

Beliefs about foreign language learning 1=agree 2= disagree 3= no comment	1%	2%	3%	M	SD	rank
1. It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	30.5	33.5	36.0	1.97	.80	(05)
2. You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.	67.3	10.4	22.3	2.56	.67	(02)
3. People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.	8.8	52.9	38.2	1.55	.65	(09)
4. I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	18.5	43.8	37.7	1.74	.74	(07)
5. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words.	38.6	20.2	41.2	2.18	.74	(03)
6. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English without correction, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly (to correct errors) later on.	11.8	61.4	26.7	1.50	.69	(10)
7. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.	15.7	57.1	27.2	1.58	.74	(08)
8. The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language.	23.3	37.0	39.8	1.86	.76	(06)
9. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	34.2	26.7	39.0	2.07	.77	(04)
10. Language learning involves a lot of memorization.	70.4	8.4	21.2	2.62	.63	(01)
Total				2.25	.28	

4.4 Nursing students' anxiety about foreign language learning

The findings reveal that students are anxious most that they never feel quite sure of themselves when they are speaking

in English class. In addition, they feel more tense and nervous in English class than in other classes. They are worried to find themselves thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course. They feel embarrassed to volunteer answers in English class and worry about making mistakes in English class. In comparison, students are less anxious about not understanding what the teacher is saying in English class, knowing that they are going to be called on in English class, always feeling that the other students speak English better than they do, and being afraid that their English teacher is ready to correct every mistake they make. The results of students' anxiety about foreign language learning are shown in Table 3:

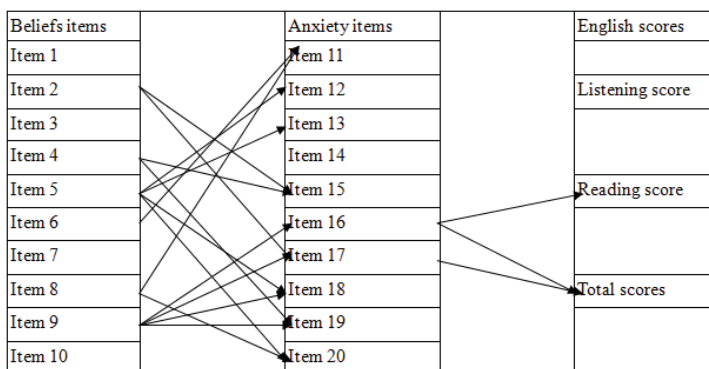
Table 3. Nursing students' anxiety about foreign language learning

Item	1%	2%	3%	M	SD	rank
11. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class.	34.9	21.0	44.1	2.13	.73	(01)
12. I don't worry about making mistakes in English class.	21.0	59.6	19.4	1.98	.63	(05)
13. I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in English class.	20.4	41.2	38.4	1.79	.75	(08)
14. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English class.	10.6	49.0	40.4	1.61	.66	(10)
15. During English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	34.5	23.0	42.5	2.11	.75	(03)
16. It embarrassed me to volunteer answers in my English class.	25.3	26.2	48.5	1.99	.71	(04)
17. Even if I am well prepared for English class, I feel anxious about it.	17.3	39.7	43.1	1.77	.72	(09)
18. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	17.6	32.8	49.6	1.84	.69	(06)
19. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	16.3	35.3	48.4	1.81	.69	(07)
20. I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in my other classes.	33.3	19.8	47.0	2.13	.71	(01)
Total				1.92	.35	

4.5 The impacts of nursing students' beliefs on their anxiety and English scores

It's found that students' beliefs have some impacts on their anxiety and English scores. For example, students who believe that "It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it" (item 9) are more anxious about "It embarrassed me to volunteer answers in my English class"(item 16) , which has positive impacts on both their reading scores and total scores (p<.05). Furthermore, they worry more about "Even if I am well prepared for English class, I feel anxious about it" (item 17), which has impacts on their total scores negatively (p<.05). The impacts of students' beliefs on anxiety and their English scores are shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1. The impacts of nursing students' beliefs on anxiety and English scores



5. Discussion and Implication

5.1 Discussion

1. In the study, many nursing students' English ability is not satisfactory, especially their reading ability. In addition, individual differences in English ability exist among students.

2. Many nursing students believe the importance of memorization, excellent pronunciation, lots of vocabulary words, good preparation, and the difficulties of English speaking and understanding.
3. Nursing students are more anxious about speaking English, being absent-minded, making mistakes, and to volunteer answers in English class.
4. Particularly, nursing students believe that English reading and writing are easier than speaking and understanding, which has the impact on their being anxious about English class, and negatively predicts their English total scores ($p < .05$).

5.2 Implication

1. Nursing students' English ability should be improved, especially their reading ability.
2. Nursing students' individual differences in English ability should be taken into consideration. Hence, homogeneous grouping instruction should be encouraged.
3. Nursing students' beliefs are proved to have some impacts on their anxiety and predictive of English scores. So, they should be encouraged to develop positive beliefs and decrease their anxiety for a better English performance.

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