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Reforming Beliefs

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ANXIETY: AN INVESTIGATION ON ITS CAUSES AND THE INFLUENCE IT POURS ON COMMUNICATION IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE

Dr. T. Karunakaran, Md. Masud Rana & Manwarul Haq

ABSTRACT

That anxiety has an influential effect on learning English language is undeniable. It has been observed through different research activities that most of the students in English language classrooms experience anxiety that results in stuttering and fast heart beating. The wide-spread use of English language and the use of communicative language teaching have increased the demand to have a good command over English but existence of such anxiety prevent, most of the time , them from achieving the expected goal. To achieve the desired goal, the responsibility of a language teacher is deemed highly important in order to assist the learners. This qualitative study has attempted to investigate the factors that language anxiety can possibly stem from learning environment and has recommended a variety of strategies to cope with it. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four individuals who have been learning English for several years. Findings of the study exhibit the basic causes of English learning anxiety from the learners' perspectives as well as the effects of it. Furthermore, considering the important role of teachers in foreign language pedagogy, a need has been felt to investigate the beliefs and perceptions of language teachers about learning and teaching English.

Keywords: Anxiety, Communicative language, Investigate, Language pedagogy, Qualitative study

1. Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language has always been a difficult job for many countries like Bangladesh. Here students try to expose themselves in English only in a language class. Most of the students express their tension, anxiety, fear, feeling of uneasiness etc against learning English as a foreign language. However, the amount of this feeling may vary from student to student and it cannot be claimed that it does not exist at all. The feeling of anxiety can create

problems in the acquisition, retention and production of the language, which generally affects their academic results as compared to their more tension free classmates. Learners who feel anxious in their foreign language learning generally find their study less enjoyable and it pours a negative impact on their performance.

Language teachers also reveal the existence of foreign language anxiety in the classrooms and how it can influence learners' performance; however, they are very much reluctant to take any step to attend this important aspect.

Since anxiety has a multi- dimensional nature and it affects learners' performance, it deserves continuing investigation. Moreover, since the issue of proper management or strategies have not been much discussed in the literature of English as Foreign Language (EFL) , studying this issue is very much reasonable. Besides, it is very important to investigate language learners' perspectives on English language learning anxiety to find out what factors enhance their anxiety. It is thought that by rooting out or at least reducing these issues, ELT teachers and experts can ensure a more tranquil atmosphere, so that more fruitful language learning would take place.

2. Statement of the Problem

Now, we are living in a global village. Most of the countries in the world are interrelated and interdependent. They are sharing their education, technology, business etc. through the medium of English. This expansion of English language has increased this demand to acquire good command over English. However, learners of English language sometimes express a feeling of nervousness, mental stress or anxiety while learning this. The problem exists among ESL/EFL learners from beginning to more advanced learners. Even highly advanced ESL/EFL learners feel anxious while learning English in some situations, both within and out of the classroom setting. The learners wonder why they fail to learn English, because their compulsive efforts do not lead to their expected performances. Most of the teachers are not aware of the fact that their students are not able to show their full potentiality due to the stressful situation they are in. Although some teachers have shown their advocacy in favor of the necessity to make the learning process as enjoyable and stress free as possible, they are not so active to find out the ways to achieve such a goal. Studies, that have examined anxiety, related to language learning, may appear as a guide for language teachers in terms of helping them to boost up their understanding

of language learning from the learners' perspectives. Such studies can also provide insights into how experts can develop proper interventions to decrease language anxiety among second/foreign language learners. In addition, by exploring the causes and effects of language anxiety and their relationship to language achievement, strategies and interventions to increase the self-confidence of learners and lower their language anxiety can prove effective to all stakeholders.

3. Objectives of the Study

The present study aims at investigating the issue of English language learning anxiety from the learners' perspectives. More precisely, it is looking into the causes of English language learning anxiety, as revealed by the language learners. It also discusses the causes that can decrease learning anxiety. The study deals with the following objectives:

- a) To explore how English language learners experience anxiety in their language learning.
- b) To find out the root of these anxieties.
- c) To find out the factors that can reduce anxiety

4. Literature Review

4.1 Anxiety

Anxiety is one of the most well documented psychological phenomena (Chastain ,1988). Developing Second Language Skills defines anxiety as a state of uneasiness and apprehension or fear caused by the anticipation of something threatening. According to Spielberger (1983), anxiety can be described as the subjective feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system. "It is a psychological constraint, commonly described by psychologists as a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only directly associated with an object" (Hilgard & Atkinson, 1971 cited in Scovel, 1991:18). Anxiety, as perceived intuitively by many language learners, negatively influences language learning and has been found to be one of the most highly examined variables in all of psychology and education (Horwitz, 2001:113).

4.2 Factors Related to Anxiety

Anxiety has a multi- dimensional nature so that many factors or subjects like learners' own sense of self, language classroom environment, learners' belief, teachers belief, socio cultural factors, social environment , errors of social setting, social status etc. are related to this issue.

4.3 Self-Perception

Horwitz et al. (1986:128) thinks "perhaps no other field of study poses as much of a threat to self-concept as language study does." Actually it is thought that any type of performance in L2 is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator, which can lead to embarrassment. Self-concept is " the totality of an individual's thoughts, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and values having reference to himself as object"(Laine, 1987:15). The term "self-esteem" is synonymous with 'self-concept' and it is directly related to language anxiety. Krashen (1980: 15) cited in Young (1991:427) suggests, "the more I think about self-esteem, the more impressed I am about its impact. This is what causes anxiety in many people. People with low self-esteem worry about what their peers think; they are concerned with pleasing others. " According to Terror Management Theory (TMT), "people are motivated to maintain a positive self-image because self-esteem protects them from anxiety" (Greenberg et al., 1992: cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999:229).

4.4 Learners' Beliefs

To describe the learners' belief regarding this issue researchers generally use some terms like 'irrational', 'unrealistic' etc. Horwitz (1988) cited in Ohata, (2005:138) noted that a number of beliefs derived from learners' irrational and unrealistic conceptions about language learning, such as:

- a) Some students believe that language learning is a special gift not possessed by all.
- b) Some believe that we need to think about accuracy rather than fluency.
- c) Some emphasis on native like accent and guessing to improve speaking and listening skill.
- d) Some think that language learning is an act of translating from English or any second/foreign language.

These sorts of unrealistic beliefs and perceptions on English language learning usually lead to frustration and irritation towards students' own poor performance in a second/foreign language. According to Young (1991:428), erroneous beliefs about language learning can contribute greatly to creating language anxiety in students. Ohata (2005:138) explained that unrealistic beliefs can lead to greater anxiety and frustration, especially when the beliefs and reality clash.

4.5 Teachers' Beliefs

Just like learners' beliefs about language learning, some teachers' beliefs about English language learning have also been found to be a source of anxiety. Some teachers think that their role is to correct rather than to facilitate students when learners make mistakes. In the same way, many teachers consider their role to be "less a counselor and friend and objected to a too friendly and in authoritative student-teacher relationship." Some researchers (Koch and Terrel; Horwitz, 1986 & 1988; Young, 1990 cited in Young: 429) have reported that students understand that some error corrections are necessary but they consistently report anxiety over responding incorrectly and looking or sounding 'dumb' or 'inept'. Young (1991:429), realizing this phenomenon, stated that the problem for the students is "not necessarily error correction but the manner of error correction when, how often, and most importantly, how errors are corrected.

4.6 Socio-Cultural Factors

Language anxiety starts primarily from social and communicative aspects of language learning. That is why it can be considered as one of the social anxieties. In Bangladesh, the target language (English) is not used as L1 in the community. Learners in such environments are exposed to the language only in the class room where they spend less time in contact with language, covering a smaller discourse type. The limited exposure to the target language and lack of opportunities to practice different skills in such environment do not let the communicative abilities of L2/FL learners fully develop and result into embarrassment or stress for them when they are required to use this language both in and out of the class.

4.7 Errors of Social Setting

It is also another issue to describe socio-cultural factors. Errors in social settings are

mostly overlooked if they do not interfere with meaning because people consider it impolite to interrupt and correct somebody who is trying to have conversation with them. From socio-cultural perspectives, status is an important aspect in people's interaction with one another in social relationships. Within any social context, there exists a status relationship between interlocutors that carries a significant impact on language and language use and this is an important aspect of social interaction.

4.8 Classification of Anxiety

Psychologists make a distinction between three categories of anxiety: trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety is the tendency of a person to be nervous or feel anxious irrespective of the situation he/she is exposed to. It is related to a person's character and hence is permanent and difficult, so it is somewhat impossible to get rid of. A person who is trait anxious is likely to feel anxious in different situations. Once the anxiety becomes trait one, it will hinder language learning. The third category, situation-specific anxiety, refers to the persistent and multi-faceted nature of some anxieties (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991:18). A specific type of situation or event such as public speaking, examinations or class participations arouses it.

4.9 Causes of Anxiety

Language anxiety is a psychological construct. It most likely originates from students' own self, e.g., his or her self-perceptions, perceptions about others such as mates, instructors, interlocutors etc. Language anxiety may be a result as well as a cause of insufficient command of the target language (Sparks and Gansehow n.d cited in Horwitz , 2001:118). That means, it is sometimes experienced due to linguistic difficulties L2/FL learners face in learning and using the target language. Within social context, language anxiety may be experienced due to extrinsic motivators (Schwartz, 1972 cited in Scovel, 1991:10), such as different social and cultural environments, particularly the environments where L1 and L2/FL learning takes place. Also, the target language is a representation of another cultural community; there is a predisposition among some people to experience such anxiety because of their own concerns about ethnicity, foreignness, and the like (Gardner cited in Horwitz & Young, 1991). Learners' social status and gender are also the important factors in causing language anxiety for L2/FL learners.

4.10 Effect of Anxiety

English language learning anxiety has been associated with a large number of negative outcomes that can be classified as psychological, physical or social (e.g., Bailey, Daley & Onwuegbuzie, 1999; Oxford 1999a). Psychological symptoms can include, for example, fear, feeling of helplessness, embarrassment, going blank, poor memory recall and retention among others. Physical symptoms can include, rapid heart beating, muscle tension, dry mouth and excessive perspiration. Inappropriate silence, unwillingness to participate, absenteeism, withdrawal from the course etc. are the negative outcomes of social behavior. These effects can lead to poor performance and low achievement.

In contrast to the negative effect of anxiety, there is an indication that a certain degree of anxiety may be beneficial to some learners (Scovel, 1978). Sometimes, it motivates learners to study harder and make stronger efforts to perform better on classroom tasks. It improves learners' attention, alertness and like. According to Scovel (1991 pp), facilitating anxiety "motivates the learner to 'fight' the new learning task; it gears the learners emotionally for approach behavior."

4.11 Research on Anxiety

Different researchers have investigated the issue of learning anxiety from different point of views. Liu (2006:301-316) conducted a study on anxiety in Chinese undergraduate non-English majors at three different proficiency levels. Through the process of observations, interviews and reflective journals, the study revealed that:

- a) At every level, a notable number of students felt anxious when speaking English in class.
- b) The more proficient the students tended to be the less anxious.
- c) During the response to the teachers, the students felt the most anxious and they felt the least anxious during pair work.

Worde (2003) investigated the causes of language learning anxiety through his study. He found that speaking activities, inability to understand unfavorable classroom atmosphere, fear of negative evaluation, native speakers, pedagogical practices, methodology and teachers themselves were the main sources of anxiety.

Marwan (2007:37-55) conducted a study on Indonesian students' foreign language anxiety. The aim of this study was to find out the causes of anxiety and to search the strategies to cope with them. The findings show that most learners experienced a certain degree of anxiety in their language learning. Some factors like lack of confidence, lack of preparation and fear of failing or scoring poor grade were the primary causes of their anxiety. Findings further revealed that lack of preparation was the major factor contributing to learning anxiety among all language learners irrespective of their language proficiency levels and those female learners are less confident in their learning than their male counterparts are.

William and Andrade (2008:181-191) conducted a similar study and examined anxiety in Japanese university EFL classes in regard to the type of situations that stimulate the anxiety, the perceived cause of anxiety and the ability to cope with it. They conducted a survey among 243 Japanese learners in 31 conversational English classes at four-year universities in Japan based on questions used in a cross-cultural study of emotion response. The findings of their study showed that anxiety was most often related with the output and processing (in the sense of mental planning) stages of the learning process and that students attributed the cause of anxiety to the teacher or other people. Most of the students felt frustrated and helpless, although some students, who perceived themselves as having higher ability indicated a greater sense of resilience. Overall, the findings indicate that some degree of anxiety affected 75% of the learners and the debilitating aspects of anxiety strongly obstacle about 11% of them. Another important finding is that many students enter their university EFL classes expecting to experience an anxiety-producing situation and that anxiety is likely to significantly suffer the performance of them.

5. Methodology

Qualitative approach was used for this present study. Anxiety is a subjective experience, which varies from individual to individual. In order to capture the huge range of subjects and experiences, a qualitative approach was considered an appropriate strategy as "it begins with individuals and sets out to understand and interpret their experiences of a particular phenomenon"(Cohen et al,2000:23).How learners experience language anxiety, what they think

are the causes of such an experience, and how teachers perceive this phenomenon were investigated using qualitative research strategy. These aspects allow the researcher to understand the subjective world of human experience by making an effort to get inside the person and to understand from within.

The researcher has used this approach as it allows him to obtain descriptive information on variables not easily accessed through empirical research and can provide a way to view phenomena from the point of view of the subject (Price, 1991:101). Flick (2009) holds the view that qualitative method is most effective to investigate the participants' perspectives and viewpoints on a particular topic.

Four participants were chosen for this study. They were adult language learners who have been learning English for few years and have been to different language classes. They were selected based on easy sampling, a sampling technique that refers to the selection of the cases that are easiest to access under given conditions. Indeed, these four language learners were the most available ones for the researchers. The first participant was a 23-year-old Bangladeshi boy named Rasel. The second one was Samima, 21-year-old Bangladeshi girl, who has been learning English for more than 10 years. The names of the third and fourth participants were Rafat and Usha. They have been learning English for six years. It is worth mentioning that the names used in this study is pen name chosen by them. Considering the constraints, like limited period and the fact that only one researchers managed to undertaking this study and it was considered the perfect and useful to carry out a semi-structured interview in order to reach the core of the matter rather than administrating questionnaires. Besides, written questions are somewhat rigid in nature and the complete lack of personal contact prohibits verifications of views and knowledge. The logic behind the use of interview as data collection tool was that it could provide access to things that cannot be directly observed, such as feelings, thoughts, intentions, or beliefs. It also provides participants with opportunities to select, reconstruct, and reflect upon details of their experience within the specific context of their lives.

6. Result and discussion

The researchers extracted 36 codes from the transcript data and managed to combine the codes and merge them into three categories: language-learning experience, causes of language

learning anxiety, and sources of anxiety. The purposes of these categories are to achieve a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Researchers discussed language-learning experience as the first category. Four participants of the study expressed their experiences and feelings about their language learning like how they started to learn the language and especially, the benefit and uses of the language they have had. Samima, the young girl of 21 year old, expressed several uses of learning English such as finding new friends through internet and sharing ideas with them, being able to understand her favorite songs and movies in English and the chance to carry on her higher studies.

Rasel acknowledged that he felt interest to learn English to explore the knowledge of world literature going through the famous writers, to share his ideas with other friends through the modern electronic devices, to uphold his status among his friends and last of all to build confidence within him. Rafat and Usha are too interested in learning English and find it useful.

In another part of the interview, the participants discussed of what they liked best about their language classes. Samima is interested in speaking and listening activities and finds them productive for few reasons: expressing her ideas and practicing their speaking abilities, understanding and responding to the teachers and foreign friends, enjoying songs and music and like. Though Rasel has a similar opinion, he is not so interested in speaking and listening activities like Samima. He likes mostly reading activities. He mentioned two reasons for his preference: first, he can learn many words, expressions, phrases, grammatical points and second, reading activities give him the chance to improve not only his guessing ability but also writing skill. Rafat and Usha are interested in expanding their knowledge of vocabulary as well as improving their speaking ability. They believe that the larger one's domain of vocabulary, the better they will be able to speak and make themselves understood.

One of the objectives of the present study was to figure out what factors language learners think can cause language-learning anxiety. To provide the answer of this question, the participants of the study mentioned several factors that can cause language-learning anxiety. According to Samima, anxiety originates from several sources such as the behavior of the

teacher and the negative evaluation performed by them, peer's criticizing attitudes, lack of preparation etc. Such finding is somewhat similar to Marwan's (2007:37-55) study. This study revealed that one of the major causes of anxiety is the learners' lack of preparation. The causes Samima mentions are also similar to those found in Casado and Dereshiwsky's (2004: 23-35) study in which the major cause of anxiety was found to be the learners' fear of negative evaluation which includes fear of correction or fear of mistakes.

Samima also thinks that listening is the most anxiety provoking activity for several reasons: a) unknown words and expressions b) different intonation pattern c) the speed with which the speakers speak and like. She also adds that she loses her concentration while listening. She says, "when I go through such experience I cannot find myself in the class and I lose my concentration because I personally cannot tolerate something on which I have no interest" In case of anxiety, Rasel has almost similar viewpoints. He believes that one source of anxiety is the teacher himself or herself. He explains his thinking this way:

"The teacher plays an important role to make the class anxious or enjoyable, if the teacher is very rigid and ill tempered, it creates anxiety to me, makes me nervous and I always feel anxious in such atmosphere, but if I know the teacher is friendly, smiling and has good behavior and also knows his/ her jobs responsibilities, I feel easy and I can trust that teacher and don't feel nervous."

Next cause of anxiety to Rasel is students. He argues that his classmates also sometimes make him anxious. He remarks, "if I see that other students are doing better than me in their English, it makes me anxious and I think if I say something in class in front of my classmates they will laugh at my mistakes." It seems that he is afraid of losing his face in front of his classmates. Another cause of anxiety to Rasel is the kind of activities that are imposed to the language classroom. As he has expressed that his favorite activity is reading, he is more comfortable with doing reading activities in classroom. He says that if reading is practiced in the classroom he does not feel anxious at all. However, if the teacher spends most of the time listening or speaking skill, he does not enjoy the class and does not feel comfortable in such an environment.

Another noteworthy cause of anxiety that Rasel believes is the test the teacher arranges.

He believes that tests are embarrassing not only for him but also for other students. The cause of such anxiety is that he is afraid of not being able to gain expected score on the test, which will shatters his reputation in the class. The final cause of anxiety to Rasel is the classroom environment. He does not feel comfortable in a classroom that does not look like a classroom, such as too hot, too cold, insufficient light, lack of comfortable chairs and clean boards, too small size classroom etc. He further adds that he has experienced being in such an environment and that even the teacher did not like the classroom.

Rafat and Usha, too, have almost similar opinions. Both of them agree that the major source of their anxieties is their teacher. Rafat says that he feels most anxious if he does not understand the teacher well and if the teacher speaks unclearly. He remembers the type of classes in which the teacher was not able to convey his message to the students and thus the students bewildered. The students, therefore, start feeling anxious when they do not see any progress in their knowledge and do not see the class useful. Another point of anxiety revealed by Usha, is the teachers' behavior while correcting one's mistakes. He prefers not to speak in an environment where the teachers attend to every single mistake a student commits and tries to highlight the mistake in a very insulting way.

Regarding the effects of anxiety, all four participants believe that anxiety plays a debilitating role in their language learning and affects their learning negatively. Many previous students proved this issue. Rasel mentions that when he feels anxious, there is a high chance that he makes mistakes, which will result in being criticized by his classmates and being evaluated negatively by the teacher.

In the same way, Samima holds the view that the existence of anxiety is a hindrance towards her success in the process of language learning. She argues that anxiety decreases her self-confidence and influences her performances negatively. Such belief is in agreement with Macintyre's(1998) study that concluded the existence of learning anxiety disturbs one's self esteem and self-confidence. Moreover, Samima believes that the more anxious she feels, the higher will be the probability of making mistakes. Rafat believes that learning and speaking a foreign language in the class room is " always a problem " He expresses " classroom is always a problem--- you find many people watching you and try to correct you, laugh at you, you will be

blamed for any mistakes, and you have to be corrected because it is a class." Usha, too, believes that when he feels anxious, he cannot concentrate properly on what he is doing, which will result in him making frequent mistake.

It can be concluded that the participants of the study are well aware of the factors that cause anxiety in the process of language learning. Furthermore, all of them acknowledge the fact that the existence of anxiety is the main factor that affects their performance negatively and does not let them display their full efficiency.

7. Recommendations

Considering the issue of detrimental influence of anxiety on second/foreign language learning and communication, it is important that language trainers or language instructors not only should recognize the causes and effects of anxiety but also to assist them to overcome their feelings of uneasiness and discomfort. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations can be offered:

- 1) First, ESL/EFL trainers should explore and accept the existence of the feeling of anxiety in language learning and then should take positive initiatives for its effective reduction. They should identify individuals' stress and anxiety and should apply proper techniques to help them counteract these feelings. Three approaches (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) presented by Henbree (1998) cited in Ying-Ling & Kondo (2004:259) can be recommended in order to select a suitable strategy.
- 2) As students are very much sensitive to fear of making mistakes, teachers should encourage them to have the confidence to make mistakes in order to acquire communication skill. Teachers need to ensure the students that its possible to learn through mistakes. If there is no mistakes there will be no chance to learn anything. It is natural to make mistake and through practice, they will go to the perfection. Besides as a positive response to students' concern over the harsh manner of teachers' error correction, teachers' selection of error correction technique, as Horwitz et al (1981:131) recommended, should be based on instructional philosophy and on reducing defensive reactions to the students.

- 3) Teachers should ensure friendly, cooperative, informal and learning supportive environment to the classroom. This makes students feel comfortable when responding in the class. This can reduce, although not eliminate altogether, the effect of social and status difference between students and teachers to considerable extent.
- 4) Teachers should avoid setting up activities that increase the chances for them to fail .They should also make sure, whether the students are ready for their task and have sufficient ideas, and preparation to complete the task effectively.
- 5) It is also recommended that teachers should confront students' erroneous and irrational beliefs by cultivating in them "reasonable commitments for successful language learning" (Horwitz 1988 cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999:232). These beliefs can be changed by instilling realistic expectations and reasonable performance standards in the learners and by raising their awareness regarding the speed with which fluency in the target language can be achieved.
- 6) Teachers should have proper sense of culture and ethnic background of the students and an awareness of their previous language learning experiences. These generally assist language teachers to understand and decode anxiety related behaviors in some students. In a class of mixed culture, teachers should specifically make the effort to create a sense of friendship and cooperation among the students. This will help them to speak more confidently and with less anxiety in the class
- 7) Finally, there should be some specific teacher training courses on language anxiety in order to make teachers aware of this complex issue and, hence deal with it.

8. Conclusion

However, the present study has provided a significant insight into language anxiety from, mostly, a descriptive aspects; the phenomenon, because of its complicated and multi-dimensional nature, requires further exploration from a variety of perspectives and approaches. This study is an attempt to apprehend the true nature of the phenomenon from a different perspective. Recommendations based on the findings of this study are not complete one and

every language teacher can offer different ways of reducing language anxiety based upon his/her personal observation of the phenomenon. This study just offers a number of techniques to cope with the potentially pervasive and detrimental effect of language anxiety. It is suggested that a proper utilization of these strategies by language teachers can help them to reduce second/foreign language anxiety and can potentially increase students' confidence to learn and use the target language. So, it goes without saying that only in a relaxed and stress free atmosphere can ensure learners to show their full capabilities and learn the material effectively and successfully.

9. Limitation of the study

The study suffers from a couple of limitations. First, the sample of the subject was small. Such small number of participants may not be authentic to investigate such an important and complex issue. So, more research can be done with more number of participants in order to include a variety of voices and viewpoints on the phenomenon. Moreover, this study is purely a qualitative one in which the only data collection technique was face-to-face interviews with the participants. It is suggested that researchers can employ other data collection techniques e.g., observation and self-report questionnaires in order to obtain a more detailed picture of such a complex issue like language learning anxiety.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. T. Karunakaran is a TESL Ontario accredited language instructor who has published articles and research papers in reputed journals like Language in India, Contemporary Discourse, Asian Economic and Social Society, International Journal of English and Education and NELTA Choutari. He has presented papers in international conferences in Sri Lanka and abroad. He has been in the editorial boards of International Journal of English and Education and Literati. He has been an ESL teacher at the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka for more than twelve years and his research interests are borrowings, bilingualism and bilingual education.



Md. Masud Rana is currently working as English Language Teacher Trainer in English Language Teaching Improvement Project under the Ministry of Education in Bangladesh. In addition, he holds an experience of three years in teaching English, both at undergraduate level and in different medical colleges.



Manwarul Haq is a Ph.D. student at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. He is currently working on his thesis which is in the area of teacher education and development. He has an M.Phil. in ELE and has been working as a Teaching Assistant for two years at the same university. Besides, he holds an experience of six years in teaching English, both at higher secondary and undergraduate levels