

Lowering Anxiety Among Low Proficiency ESL Learners using the Mafia Game

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Abstract: *Low proficiency ESL learners often experience anxiety and feel uncomfortable in language classes because of their limited linguistic knowledge. Therefore, teachers can incorporate language games in the classroom to lower the learners' anxiety in ESL classroom in order to maximise the positive result on the learners' language learning, acquisition and motivation. This study focuses on the use of the 'Mafia Game' in ESL classroom to help the learners to be less anxious in ESL classroom since respondents involved in this study are low proficiency ESL learners. The "Mafia Game" was played as a speaking activity which required players to interrogate and make a decision in a team. The instruments used in this study included a set of questionnaire, students' self-report and a set of semi-structured interview administered to 137 undergraduate students and 12 facilitators. The findings revealed that learners tended to have lower anxiety in learning English using the game. Besides, findings showed that the game is a useful tool to engage learners' participation and to improve the speaking ability of low proficiency ESL learners. It can be recommended that using games in ESL classroom is beneficial to low proficiency ESL learners from several aspects, however teachers ought to consider thoughtfully when selecting suitable games and also instructions that must be given to students during the implementation of the game since students with different English ability performed differently.*

Keywords: *Language games, anxiety, low proficiency students, ESL learners*

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning the English language is a challenge for Malaysians since it is not their first language. It is difficult to orient the Malaysian learners especially those who are low proficient on the knowledge of English as a second language (ESL). Most ESL learners experience challenges in the classroom environment that leads them to having difficulty in participating and formulating language output (Spadaccini, 2005). Such low participation and production is due to their limited linguistic knowledge that makes them anxious and uncomfortable in ESL classroom. It is also important to acknowledge that in-class anxiety plays a role in ESL performance. Thompson and Khawaja (2016) claim that such anxiety (second language anxiety) occurs from the pressure put on learners to perform in the target language (TL; in this context, the English language). Such anxiety causes learners to minimally participate and practice the language in the classroom.

Maximising the language output remains a dilemma in real-life ESL learning and teaching as it relies on the origin of the learners and the regular interactions they contribute to achieve effective learning outcomes. Language anxiety is also a detrimental factor to hinder learners' performance in a language classroom (FakiehAlrabai, 2015). One potential solution to this is by including a game: 'Mafia' that can reduce learners' anxiety and prompts critical thought formulation among learners.

The game does not only provide immediate solution for reducing anxiety through social interaction among learners but also promotes critical thinking strategies among them.

In Malaysia, most schools still practice conventional classroom dynamic where students have a dire chance to practice their speech (Saleh and Aziz, 2012). Most schools still only stress on the structural aspects of teaching English that translates to significant amount of time invested in teaching English grammar and writing. Teaching techniques like grammar drills, pronunciation drills and writing drills prove that teachers still practice conventional teaching methods (CTM) which is a highly teacher-centered approach. Coming primarily from this background, it could be understood that neither did learners have sufficient training in English speaking classes, nor did they have adequate practice in their daily lives to even utilize English lexicons. This deficit in speaking skills can hence be attributed to the lack of opportunities to practice speeches on the part of the students (Woodrow, 2006; Liu & Chu, 2010). The inadequate platform to practice oral production of English contributes to low participation at tertiary level of education when learners complete their secondary education.

Mafia Game

'Mafia' is a famous party game invented by Dmitri Davidoff in 1986. The conceptual framework of 'Mafia' is it involves community conflict and needs to be solved by the players (Tiltona, 2015). The players are divided into two groups: a group of mafias and a group of innocents. This game is exclusive in such a way that the players (learners) are programmed to handle crime cases and eliminate the criminals. Each player is secretly assigned a role based on those two groups (mafias and innocents). In one big group, there may be up to six mafias while the innocents are represented by civilians, doctors, lawyers, villagers, police officers etc. All players will then close their eyes and listen to specific instructions presented by a moderator (instructor or facilitator).

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The mafias will first open their eyes and secretly (silently) decide on killing an innocent each round. After they have decided, the moderator will announce that an innocent has been killed and remove that player from the game. Next, all surviving players will open their eyes and run a debate or discussion on who killed the innocent. The 'accused suspect' will get the opportunity to defend himself or herself. A vote among players will be casted and the suspect will have to leave the game (if voted guilty). The game continues until all mafia members have been eliminated or the mafias outnumber the innocents. The moderator announces whether the innocents win or the mafias win the game.

This game can also enhance the critical thinking among low proficient learners as well as improve motivation among them. One of the challenges faced by Malaysian learners is the unfamiliarity with the target language. Therefore, this game is designed to meet the local context and the instructions have been made simpler for better engagement among learners. With this simplified version of 'Mafia', the learners get to practice using common expressions they are familiar with. This feature of the game allows learners to learn and predict the sequence of specific vocabularies through the debate or discussion.

Mafia game challenges the players in a sense that they have to critically evaluate other players' arguments and identify the real culprit to advance in the game. This requires high level of focus and engagement. Gameplay concept like Mafia ought to stimulate learners' attention and helps learners to become aware of the relationship between the game and real life issues through making arguments, clarifying and justifying (Elias, Garfield &Gutschera, 2012).

II.LITERATURE REVIEW

Mafia game and anxiety

Mafia game is driven by Vygotsky's sociocultural view of learning. Learning is viewed as a social process and social interaction plays a significant role in knowledge development (Young et al., 2012). This game aims at enabling ESL learners to choose a solution (deciding which player(s) to eliminate) based on the problem (crime). Learners have to work together to discuss and decide. The discussion itself provides room for creative and critical thought formulation among them (Elias, Garfield &Gutschera, 2012). Learners work in small groups and construct knowledge by engaging themselves in group discussion. Working in small groups is a great method to lower learners' inhibition and anxiety to perform in TL compared to conventional teaching method (FakiehAlrabai, 2015). As their anxiety is reduced through engagement to the game, their willingness to communicate is increased which eventually increase their TL performance.

An essential part of learning is the creation of interest and following the interest in educational field (Nakamura et al., 2017). Mafia game is interesting to be explored by learners as it creates a conducive platform for the learners to learn. The motivation to participate in the gameplay is enhanced in the classroom setting when the learners generate their interest through mutual goal to win the game. Learners like practical things in the English course instead of traditional

dry lectures. In addition, this game creates a platform for them to apply the English knowledge into use, and this advances their problem-solving skills through series of debates or discussions. This conducive learning setting is crucial as learning English as a second language requires a proper induction session to make learners learn actively and effectively (Tilona, 2015).

Although there were studies done on the implications of using thinking games like Mafia in the classroom (Young et al, 2012), research on using Mafia game in ESL context is still limited. This study aims at filling a crucial gap based on the limitation of using Mafia game intervention as a mechanism to reduce second language anxiety in ESL classroom. This study also focuses on the identification of the significance 'Mafia' game has as a mechanism to lower language anxiety among learners at the same time improve critical thinking strategy in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom. It is therefore put forward that this game is beneficial in the learning of English as a second language for low proficient English learners in Malaysia. This game has limitless advantages which make the learners motivated in learning, feel less anxious, promote their critical thinking and their mastery of the language.

Second language anxiety

Learning English can be fearsome for second language learners. The pressure on learners to perform in the target language leads them to experiencing second language anxiety. Second language anxiety is defined as the feeling of uneasiness, fear or apprehension specifically at attempting to learn and perform in a second language (Thompson and Khawaja, 2016). Language anxiety is reflected from learners' attitudes and beliefs in learning the target language (TL). The negative behaviours such as being passive, resilient to use the TL and avoidance, if not monitored or controlled can result in serious withdrawal from learning. The pioneers of language anxiety studies like Horwitz, Cope, Kleinmann, MacIntyre and Gardner claim that language anxiety is commonly associated with two types of anxiety: learning anxiety and communicative anxiety (Santos, Gorter and Cenoz, 2017). Learning anxiety can be broken down into classroom anxiety, test anxiety and first and second language differences (L1 and L2 differences) while communicative anxiety includes audience anxiety, metacognitive awareness and willingness to communicate.

III.METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed methods approach, which primarily use online survey and self-reports from the participants and facilitators to discover the participants' experiences during this learning activity that make them less anxious in ESL classroom. This mixed methods approach provides more solid evidence for studying a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative methods alone (Creswell, 1999). There are two sets of online survey; one for the students and another online survey for all



facilitators involved in this game. The online survey for the students consisted of 17 questions and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was 0.94 which was highly significant at the 0.01 level. Also, there are 11 questions in the online survey for the facilitators and the Cronbach alpha coefficient amounted to 0.88 which was highly significant at the 0.01 level.

Two sets of online surveys were employed in this study as it is less time-consuming and also it provides an abundant of information for researchers (Wright, 2005). The decision of collecting the data online was made to ensure the questionnaire as accessible as possible and also to reduce the effort to collect all responses from the large number of respondents involved in this study.

The sampling technique employed was a purposive sample and the selection of students as respondents for this study was based on the following criteria: all of them were first year full-time undergraduate students enrolled in a compulsory 3 credit “English for Academic Communication” (EAC) course for students with Band 1 and 2 in Malaysian University English Test (MUET). All items in the online survey are using 5- Likert scale (1 to 5) concerning students’ preferences in an informal English language activity with “5” indicating strong agreement and “1” indicating strong disagreement. This section included questions on how the respondents perceived this activity as part of their English learning activity to lower their anxiety in ESL classroom and whether they were satisfied with the English learning experiences they had acquired from this activity. The online survey for the facilitators was designed with the intention to find out how the students react during this game and their responses throughout the process of interrogating and identifying the ‘Mafia’.

IV. RESULTS

The present study made use of respondents at one of the public universities in Peninsular Malaysia. Learners from the same proficiency level were considered in this study whereby only those with Band 1 and Band 2 Malaysian University English Test (MUET) band scores were chosen.

This study presents the findings from a total of 137 undergraduates with a majority of them were female (N=101, 73.7%) and the remaining were male (N=36, 26.3%) and majored in different programs. Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents based on gender.

Table. 1 Gender (N=137)

	Frequency	Percent
Female	101	73.7
Male	36	26.3
Total	137	100.0

Table 2 displays the respondents’ Malaysian University Examination Test (MUET) score distribution.

Table. 2 Distribution of respondents by MUET score

Band	Frequency	Percent
Band 1	9	6.6
Band 2	128	93.4
Total	137	100.0

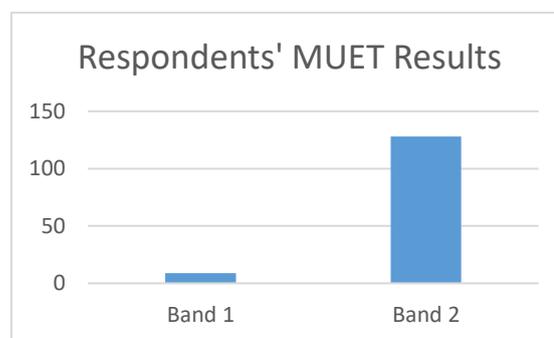


Fig. 1 Respondents’ MUET Results

A majority of the respondents are in Band 2 with a total of 128 students (93.4%) and 9 students are in Band 1 (6.6%). Descriptive statistics was used to identify the respondents’ feedback on the use the Mafia Game in their language learning.

Table. 3 Students’ overall responses (N=137)

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I enjoy learning english outside my formal classroom.	4.64	.511
2. I enjoy doing games and tasks in english in this activity.	4.59	.536
3. I think this activity is suitable for students to help them to improve their english.	4.58	.524
4. I have learnt something new from this activity.	4.53	.530
5. I would recommend eod activity to my friends.	4.52	.557
6. I feel motivated to learn english more after this activity.	4.48	.516
7. I have become more interested in english after this activity.	4.47	.569
8. My instructors have explained this activity well.	4.45	.581
9. My instructors motivate me to participate in the activity.	4.44	.567
10. I enjoy communicating with friends in english during this activity.	4.41	.601
11. I was satisfied with the quality of my learning experiences in this activity.	4.39	.646
12. I feel comfortable to communicate in english during this activity.	4.35	.660
13. I was able to communicate freely in english during this activity.	4.31	.637
14. I feel more confident using english after this activity.	4.31	.648



The descriptive statistics (Table 3) implicates that all the respondents rated the items positively since the mean scores for all corresponding item ranged from 4.64 to 4.31 and were within the upper third of the normative distribution (3-4). The items were ranked based on the highest until the lowest mean score. The item with the highest mean score is the item ‘I enjoy learning English outside my formal classroom’ (M=4.64) and the items with the lowest mean score are the items ‘I was able to communicate freely in English during this activity’ (M=4.31) and ‘I feel more confident using English after this activity’ (M=4.31).

The respondents also were asked to rate their overall experience during this learning activity and 4 respondents (2.9%) rated their overall experience as excellent, 49 respondents (35.8%) rated their overall experience as good and 84 respondents (61.3%) rated their overall experience as fair.

Table. 4 Students’ experience during the games

	Frequency	Percent
Excellent	4	2.9
Good	49	35.8
Fair	84	61.3
Total	137	100.0

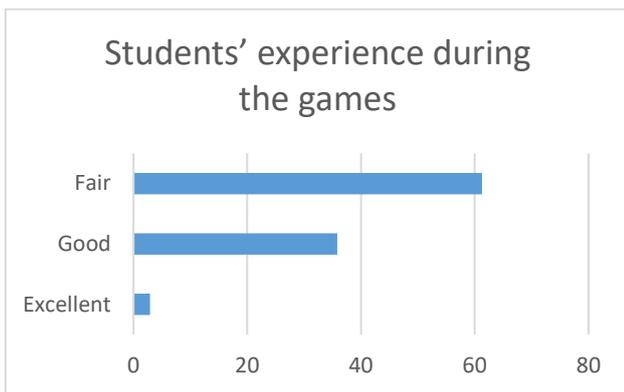


Fig. 2 Students’ experience during the games

For individual self-reports, the respondents were asked to give their opinion about the strengths of this language games and they were also asked to give their opinions on how to improve this kind of learning activity in the future. Most of the respondents were in agreement that this activity has a lot of strengths especially on how to make ESL learners less anxious in L2 classroom.

They claimed that after this activity they are more confident to communicate in English, be more motivated in learning English, and it can improve their communication skills and their vocabulary. Qualitative comments from participants’ self- reports also reflected the success of this activity to promote critical thinking and collaborative learning:

“This activity made me feel more confident to speak in English, I can learn how to cooperate with other participants, and I also can meet a new friend.”

“In my opinion, the strengths of this activity is it can improve my ability to communicate with other people in English”

“I feel more comfortable to talk with my friends in English during this activity”

“I’m not scared to talk in English because I only focus to find the Mafia”

The students also recommended certain things that they want to be improved in the future for this activity.

Most of the students hoped that this activity will be continued in the future with more fun and challenging activities and the instructors and facilitators involved must give clear instructions since many of them have limited linguistic knowledge. The students, state as follows in their self-report:

“The program should add more fun activities and more challenging tasks for all participants.”

“The instructors and facilitators must give clear instructions during the games”

This study also presents findings from the 12 facilitators that involved during the game with the students.

Table. 5 Facilitators responses (N=12)

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. The game went smoothly.	4.1667	.71774
2. Most students understood the instructions easily.	3.8333	.83485
3. Most students were able to reenact their characters (e.g. detective, mafia, doctor).	3.7500	.96531
4. Most students were able to figure out how to win the game.	3.7500	.62158
5. Most students were able to read body language and non-verbal signals to achieve a conclusion.	3.6667	.65134
6. Most students were able to perceive and respond coherently to the arguments made by other players.	3.4167	.79296
7. Most students could communicate with other players to achieve a common goal (e.g. mafia with other mafias, detective with other detectives, and doctor with other doctors).	3.6667	.88763

In the survey distributed among the facilitators, four open-ended questions were posed to explore more on the students' language learning experiences and how this game helps to develop students' critical thinking skills.

The facilitators claimed that this game really helps the students to improve their communication skills and some of the students speak more than they are usually do in the formal classroom since they are less anxious compared to conventional classroom.

"Since the game is English based, they are required to speak mainly in English. By that, they are encouraged to speak to their members in English as well."

"I believe the students **have improved their ways of thinking and communication skills** in order to make other members understand about their roles, and even during the argument session."

"When the innocent people are trying to figure out the Mafia, **they started to speak, discuss and explain themselves** in order to save themselves from elimination."

However, the facilitators have mentioned several barriers to the implementation of this game such as some students still were passive and some of the students cannot understand instructions given therefore they cannot understand the structure of the games.

"**Several students remain passive** and do not really want to participate may be due to lack of confidence level when it comes to speaking in English."

"The students **not really understand the structure of the game** until in the middle of the game."

In spite of all the barriers mentioned, the facilitators still think that this game creates a critical yet interactive environment in the language classroom as students learn to give arguments and defend themselves during the game. Due to this, facilitators believed that this game help to beat the anxiety among these low proficiency students since the focus is on finding the Mafia rather than focusing on their language. The students also slowly develop their confidence skill to communicate in English.

"The Mafia game really helps students **to improve their communication skills** as it pushes the students to talk and argue in a good way. Plus, they need to have some sort **of confidence and courage** to prove their innocence to the other members."

"This game creates mysterious condition that encouraged students **to think and speak more** than they usually do."

"Within the time limit, those who were accused as the mafia will have to defend themselves. This is where I found most of them can throw their points **confidently**."

V. DISCUSSION

Much research has been done in order to identify the variety of causes for students' hesitance to speak in English. As established in our review of literature, the biggest hindrance to English learning is foreign language anxiety (Hassan & Selamat, 2002; Baharum & Ariffin, 2014). All of the subjects who were selected have very poor English proficiency. For the purposes of the study, it was not necessary to assess these students with anxiety measurement tools like Horwitz's FCLAS. Researchers regard these students as subjects who have high anxiety in English

learning due to their performance (Schliesman & Sonandré, 1998; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009). This is based on their MUET results and the fact that they are assigned an additional subject by the university called EAC, to help empower their English proficiency to the standard suitable for a higher degree education. Most of the students came from the background of schools with poor English performance. These schools commonly apply conventional methods in English language education.

In a conventional classroom where the dimension of the communication is only set to the usual two-way back and forth between learners and the instructor, learners in the classroom cannot be comprehensively engaged with meaningful communication due to the challenge of engaging many students at once and the constraint of time. This is due to the fact that most learners would be put on the spot and will hence shy away from voluntarily communicating (Worde, 2013). In the conventional classroom, learners also enter a condition of power play where the teacher, as a dominating figure, would determine the quality of their speeches, making them think exhaustively of the right words to choose and how to present their speeches. Weimer (2002) asserted that the authority in the traditional classroom is impartially held up by the teacher as an authoritative figure and this situation would only benefit the teacher more than it does the students. The position of a student in the conventional classroom where the teacher usually plays a didactic and pontificating role aggravates students' anxiety and self-awareness in their speech.

Moreover, students in a conventional classroom usually exhibit several key characteristics which hinder their ability to speak greatly, including the fear of committing grammatical crimes (Almuhimedi & Alshumaimeri, 2015; Gill, 2016). Other than that, some students display perfectionist attitudes which hinder their ability to fluently verbalize their sentences (Warner, 2016). This behavior stems from the aforementioned root causes where students tend to shield themselves from social embarrassment. Mohamad and Ab Wahid (2018) reported in their research that students regard perceptions of others as the major cause for anxiety, "Most of the students were concerned about various kinds of evaluative situations in which their knowledge and performance of English will be monitored by people around them. They are conscious about the facial expressions of other students and also of the lecturer."

Yahya (2013) briefly summed up the factors of anxiety in his study: "EFL learners suffer from language anxiety which is aroused mainly by factors of fear of negative evaluation which consist of Yahya (2013) briefly summed up the factors of anxiety in his study: "EFL learners suffer from language anxiety which is aroused mainly by factors of fear of negative evaluation which consist of negative judgments by others, leaving unfavorable impressions on others, making verbal, pronunciation, grammar or spelling mistakes and disapproval by others." In light of this, Woodrow's (2006) following statement should become a hallmark guideline for educators in this field: "Anxiety is clearly an issue in



language learning and has a debilitating effect on speaking English for some students. So it is important that teachers are sensitive to this in classroom interactions and provide help to minimize second language anxiety.”

The objective of this study is to assess the viability of using games in order to lower the anxiety felt by students, and expand their capability and proficiency in speaking English. The study hopes to prove that using certain designs of games can become a good strategy in helping low proficiency students to ameliorate their anxiety, to help them speak English better. By using the Mafia game, the critical thinking aspect of students’ cognitive ability were hoped to be triggered as it has been established that improvement in critical thinking ability correlates strongly with improvement in speaking skills (Ramezani, Larsari&Kiasi, 2016).

The results state that students graded ‘being able to communicate freely’ with the positive rate of 4.31, showing that students were freer and more able to communicate among themselves to achieve a common goal set by the rules of the Mafia game. This is confirmed by the positive mean value of 3.67 rated by facilitators on the statement ‘most students could communicate with other players to achieve a common goal’. Facilitators also mostly agreed that, ‘most students were able to perceive and respond coherently to the arguments made by other players’ shown by the value 3.41 of the statement. In our observation, students achieved this feat by grappling at any word available within the reach of their minds, and demonstrating body language and gestures to send across messages to group members. This was necessary as the setting of the game required them to cooperate with other players by speaking to be able to move the game forward. The game inherently incorporates roleplaying, lying to hide identities, jesting, asking and replying. Facilitators confirmed that, “most students were able to reenact their characters (e.g. detective, mafia, doctor)” shown by the value 3.75 given to the statement. This informal setting of the game was the factor that helped lower the anxiety among students, as reported by other researches (Khattak et al., 2011; Reinders&Wattana, 2014). To reiterate, the fact that students rated positively that they were able to communicate freely proves that the setting of the game succeeded in lowering their anxiety to speak.

This result is significant because it demonstrates how positively learners respond to a learning environment where the risks for anxiety are decrease (Azarfam&Baki, 2012). The rate 4.64 on the statement ‘I enjoy learning English outside my formal classroom’ relating to the session students experienced is indicative of their decreased state of fear. By removing factors of anxiety in an English language learning environment, learners become less reluctant to practice their foreign language speech (Kessler, 2010). This proves that in a more student-centered environment, which is exactly how the game was set up, students show more willingness to communicate with their peers (Wright, 2011 & Clark, 2015). In the conditions set by the study, the context of the game as a determining factor allowed students’ mental capacity to be engrossed with solving problems imposed upon by the game, freeing up their minds from being too pedantic with their choice of words. Students

were also preoccupied with roleplaying and strategizing against other players in the game which helped alleviate their focus on what others perceive of them, which is a great source of anxiety for most ESL learners.

VI.CONCLUSION

The introduction of a game situation absolves the learners of much of their anxiety. Students start to become more invested in a game setting where they would have to be thinking about their actions and whether these actions fit into a consented list of rules. This preoccupation with the game is further supported by several studies. Furthermore, the game setting lowers the magnitude of any sort of perceived risk for embarrassment resulting from grammatical crimes which commonly hinders the spontaneity of speech. Given that these variables are at interplay during the entire process, instead of nitpicking on the viability of their words for fear of being undermined, students are automatically given more space to speak. This results in the freeing up of their minds, which enables them to communicate more freely. The study observed that the game setting could become an important variable in helping low proficiency ESL learners preoccupy their minds to foster willingness and spontaneity in their speeches.

Anxiety may be one of the main culprits for the impediment of ESL learners’ speech learning that educators have not seriously emphasized and addressed. In other words, many educators may not even realize that enabling students to speak a foreign language equals to removing their anxiety in the class. It is so important for educational institutions to work their way around this issue by innovating class environments which strive for the reduction of anxiety so that students can enhance their speaking skills appreciably.

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